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The influence of language on SIE experience

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Introduction

Foreign language competence is part of self-initiated expatriates' (SIEs) career capital (Dickmann et al., 2018) and a means towards the acquisition of further career capital. In this chapter, we focus on the impact of one aspect of SIEs' language competence, manifested in particular through foreign-accented speech, and its effect on SIEs' experiences. Empirically, we contribute to the body of literature addressing a particular occupational group of SIEs: International academics (Cerdin & Pargneux, 2014; Eisenberg et al., 2013; Niu, 2014; Siekierski, Correia Lima, Mendes Borini, & Morais Pereira, 2019). Conceptually, we take inspiration from critical diversity research that focuses on analysing how salient organisational differences are constructed and with what effect (Ahonen, Tienari, Meriläinen, & Pullen, 2014; Marfelt & Muhr, 2016; Tatli & Özbilgin, 2012). Specifically, we draw on the concept of 'stigmatisation' as applied to individual careers and organisational contexts, using it as a vehicle for exploring instances where SIEs experience being positioned as different. While it is important to recognise that differentiation does not always result in stigmatisation, drawing on the idea of 'stigmatisation' allows us to interrogate the circumstances under which a difference is experienced as having potentially negative consequences for SIEs.

Stigmatisation occurs when a recognised difference is judged as socially undesirable or inferior. In organisational contexts, stigmatisation happens through the attribution of negative evaluations to individuals or social groups that are perceived to deviate from organisational norms (Vickers, 2008). Organisational stigmatisation has, for example, been examined in relation to disability, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality (e.g., Kenny & Briner, 2013; Thompson

& Grandy, 2018; Tilcsik, Anteby, & Knight, 2015), providing valuable insights into how recognised ‘diversity categories’ may lead to exclusion and discrimination. Our examination of organisational differentiation focuses on a particular aspect of verbal use of language in organisational settings which employ a significant proportion of SIEs: Accent. As defined in linguistics, accent “does not contain meaningful information; it simply represents a manner of pronunciation” (Dovidio & Gluszek, 2012, p. 88). As such, all speech is accented. However, in interaction accent serves as a cue for mobilising extralinguistic evaluations of the speaker, for example, with regard to their intelligence, trustworthiness and social status (Collins & Clément, 2012; Giles & Billings, 2004). Accent thus presents a pertinent starting point for exploring organisational differentiation and the conditions under which it occurs.

We discuss the experiences of differentiation associated with the accents of non-native English speaking international academic staff in the UK. British academia has undergone profound changes linked to the marketisation and globalisation of the sector. Two significant institutional changes that have occurred as a result are increased quality and performance measurements, and a strong emphasis on internationalisation (Bamberger, Morris, & Yemini, 2019; Collini, 2017). Higher education institutions (HEIs) and particularly business schools have shown a steady increase not only in international students, but also in international staff, including many for whom English is not their native language. As such, British HEIs – which historically have employed academic faculty from outside the UK – have become even more important destinations for this professional group of highly qualified SIEs. While international academic mobility has attracted a certain amount of scholarly attention, the role of accent in influencing the experiences and careers of SIEs remains under-explored.

In the remainder of the chapter, we introduce stigmatisation as a lens through which we view differentiation and discuss accent-based stigmatisation. The subsequent section establishes the background of the research and explains the strategies for data collection and analysis. We then show how accent is experienced as a basis for differentiation; how this differentiation is framed as being relational; and how power shapes such processes in the case of the international academics in our sample. Finally, we discuss the implications of our research for SIEs and the employing organisations.

Accent-based stigmatisation in organisational contexts

Stigma has classically been defined as an individualised mark (Jones et al., 1984), or an ‘attribute’ which in others’ minds reduces somebody to a ‘tainted, discounted’ person (Goffman, 1963, p. 12-13), carrying negative connotations which in their intensity range from subtle to very explicit. Definitions include failure to meet social norms, and social processes of labelling, stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination (Link & Phelan, 2013; Phelan, Link, & Dovidio, 2008). If an identified difference is associated with negative attributes, stigmatisation occurs when “the fact that [people] are labelled, set apart, and linked to undesirable characteristics leads them to experience status loss and discrimination” (Link & Phelan, 2001, p. 371). Stigmatisation is thus understood as an outcome of power-imbued, multiple social processes of differentiation. The conditions under which stigmatisation occurs depend on the perceived quality of the difference, for example its concealability, course (whether the attribute is considered reversible), disruptiveness (the degree to which it interferes in interactions) and origin (whether an individual might have caused it or whether it is beyond their control) (Jones et al., 1984). These characteristics resonate with common classifications of diversity categories as visible and non-visible, immutable and flexible ones

(Gebert et al., 2014; Holvino & Kamp, 2009) indicating that assigning differences, depending on the context, bears the potential of stigmatisation. Phelan et al. (2008) define the key purposes of stigmatisation as exploitation/ domination ('keeping people down'); enforcement of norms ('keeping people in'); and avoidance of disease ('keeping people out'). Each of these is closely associated with power. In the case of exploitation/ domination, stigmatisation processes work to legitimate and perpetuate the inequalities between the powerful and privileged, and the disadvantaged. Secondly, stigmatisation is used to ensure conformance to social norms as defined by the dominant group. The third purpose of stigmatisation, whereby those who are different are 'kept away', is accomplished through processes of avoidance and exclusion. Stigmatisation is thus a form of social selection based on the ordering of differences, which is underpinned by power.

Social psychology research has demonstrated that accented speech can be a source of significant stigmatisation, manifest in prejudice and discrimination (Fuertes, Gottdiener, Martin, Gilbert, & Giles, 2012; Ng, 2007). While empirical evidence suggests that stronger accents do not necessarily cause communication problems (Munro & Derwing, 2001), it is often assumed that foreign-sounding accents signify deficiencies in language competence and that they interfere with the ability of an individual to communicate with others (Munro & Derwing, 1995). Of particular importance from the perspective of SIEs and their career success and progression in the host country is that when evaluating accents, the listener makes a judgement not only about the speaker's overall linguistic competence (Lindemann, 2005), but also about their competence understood more broadly (Coupland & Bishop, 2007). In general, native speakers are judged to be more intelligent, educated, capable and knowledgeable than non-native speakers (Weyant, 2007). When a non-native accent is

detected, the difference that it indicates may mobilise stereotypes affecting how the speaker is socially categorised beyond the cue that instigates the differentiation. As a result, in organisational contexts, non-native speakers are more likely to experience prejudice and stereotyping than native speakers (Creese & Kambere, 2003; Derwing & Munro, 2009; Fuertes et al., 2012; Nath, 2011). It is important to note, however, that experience of stigma related to accent depends on the workplace setting. For example, Gluszek, Newheiser, and Dovidio (2011) suggest that in higher education institutions, characterised by cultural diversity and a greater openness towards difference than some other environments, “speakers with non-native accents may experience less prejudice and more acceptance than non-native speakers in less diverse and more conservative organizational settings” (p. 39).

Individuals who experience organisational stigmatisation engage in stigma management, trying to mitigate the negative consequences of their notional stigmas (Slay & Smith, 2011) through embracing, rejecting, appropriating, modifying and adapting their stigmatised positions (Jones & King, 2014; Petriglieri, 2011; Toyoki & Brown, 2014). Members of organisations tend to modify their behaviour in attempts to make a positive impression on those they work with, be it managers, peers or subordinates (Roberts, 2005), provided that they are aware of, and have access to, the means for creating a positive impression. Such modifications may also be based on pre-experience anticipations of being socially undervalued by others. This can be understood as stigma consciousness (Pinel, 1999), whereby individuals might seek to redress expected stigmatisation and disprove prevalent stereotypes. However, behaviour modification also leaves stereotypes unchallenged due to an internalisation of the risk of stigmatisation (Link & Phelan, 2001). Accent-based stigmatisation has been considered as a set of relational, situated processes which involve not

only the listener's reactions to a person with accented speech, but also the expectations of non-native speakers to be stigmatised by others (Derwing, 2003; Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010a). This, according to Derwing (2003), might result in non-native speakers avoiding situations in which they could be evaluated negatively due to their accent; not initiating communication; and attributing blame for any communication problems to the listener's prejudice. In some instances, however, non-native speakers may view their accents as a positive differentiating feature, and therefore become more proactive and assertive in communicating with others (Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010b). Related to SIEs, the concept of stigmatisation provides a useful lens for examining the importance of language use as a factor influencing the SIE experience, both with regard to the way in which SIEs are treated within the organisations they work for and the way they modify their own behaviour as a result of their language competence. It also allows for addressing the advantages and disadvantages of verbal communication in the host language for SIEs' careers.

Research design

Method and data collection

Experiences and effects of accent-based differentiation from the perspective of non-native speaking staff were explored through professional life history interviews (Maclean, Harvey, & Chia, 2012). The fact that both of us are non-native English-speaking faculty of European origin working in UK academia created the sense that mutual commonalities of experiences existed and helped us to establish a degree of rapport and trust with the participants. For example, our status as fellow non-native English-speakers facilitated addressing the issue of accent.

We conducted a total of 54 interviews with non-native full-time employed academics in 19 business schools in the UK as part of a larger research project. For the purposes of this paper, we selected 25 interviews with academics from 13 UK business schools. They originate from Germany (4), Greece (7), Italy (8) and Poland (6); countries, which together with France and Ireland constitute the largest source countries of academic staff in business studies in the UK (HESA, 2014). The sample is composed of 13 women and 12 men aged between 30 and 50, who had lived in the UK between two and 25 years. It includes representatives of different levels of seniority, from lecturer to professor. For the sake of preserving anonymity, countries are not mentioned in relation to individual interview extracts. The interviews lasted an average of 68 minutes and were recorded and transcribed. They covered the participants' reasons for coming to and staying in the UK, and the subsequent progression of their careers. A section of the interview focused on the participants' confidence in, and concrete experiences of, using English professionally and socially.

Data analysis

Data analysis began by individually reading the transcripts and noting instances where language, particularly manner of speech was raised, whether with regard to the participants' own or others' accents, or in relation to reactions and responses to it, by themselves or others. The first reading generated a collated 'list of incidents' (Van Laer & Janssens, 2011, p. 1210) related to manner of speech. We then returned to the transcripts, noting the context within which such episodes had occurred, what the interpretation of the participant was, which other individuals or groups were mentioned, and what the experienced effects were, before bringing together our notes and jointly working on the continued analysis. Following an iterative process of moving between data and theoretical constructs (Silverman, 2006) we

developed a thematic grid in which key linguistic elements identified from the literature (e.g., pronunciation, phrasing, pace, stereotyping) were cross thematised with social categories associated with organisational diversity (see Belhoste & Monin, 2013; Kalonaityte, 2010) emerging from the participants' narratives. In short, we were looking to establish if and how an episode involving accent was interpreted through the mobilisation of particular social categories in the interview narratives. We then refined these 'nodes' by mapping them onto concrete professional settings in which language use emerged with positive or negative associations, for example related to lecturing and meetings. Having mapped out the key contexts, we further paid attention to how, if at all, the participant sought to address the situation, and what their subsequent reflections were.

Analysis

We present the analysis in four sections. Starting with demonstrating how accent emerges as a perceived difference, we then outline SIEs' experiences of stigmatisation as relational and context-dependent. Subsequently, we discuss the participants' behaviours aimed at influencing accent-related differentiation and elaborate on accent in relation to organisational power relations, prejudice and discrimination.

Accent as a basis for organisational differentiation

The SIEs in our sample commonly expressed a view of accent as a marker of difference, which positions them as outsiders in relation to a perceived norm or a dominant social group, a condition of stigmatisation (Link & Phelan, 2001). This is exemplified in the following statement:

[The accent] is the obvious thing; it's the thing that betrays me. Being pale skinned and all that, I don't have the problem of people immediately singling me out as different (Rebecca, 39, Lecturer, 7 years in the UK).

Rebecca's whiteness makes her part of a privileged, unmarked majority (Choo & Ferree, 2010), which in some circumstances enables her to 'pass unnoticed'. Through referring to accent as a form of 'betrayal', Rebecca alludes to a preference for not speaking with an accent that discloses her as different to the perceived norm. In this context, the impossibility of modifying one's accent may be a source of regret:

I wish I had no accent, but there is nothing I can do about it [...]. The fact of the accent is something I would like to get rid of, but I don't manage any more, I am too old for that (Julie, 40, Senior Lecturer, 14 years in the UK).

Having lived for more than a decade in the UK, Julie makes it clear that, for the non-native English-speaking academic, accent is a marker of difference, one that they would rather eradicate but which they have no control over. Identified with negative rather than positive connotations, accent emerges not just as a difference but also as a potential stigma.

Relational processes of accent-based stigmatisation

Previous research has demonstrated that a divide exists between native and non-native speakers in linguistically diverse organisations (e.g., Neeley, 2013). This divide is also invoked by our participants, who, when referring to their accents, typically position themselves in relation to native speakers. There are examples of participants suspecting that their accent might have a negative impact on how their overall performance is evaluated (see

also Derwing, 2003; Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010b), even if they are not certain whether this, indeed, is the case. Chris's reflection is illustrative in this respect:

I don't have a very British accent. I still have a strong [own nationality] accent so that means that one could have some feedback that wouldn't be so good from students. So, if I think back over the last twenty years that might have influenced my teaching evaluations (Chris, 49, Professor, 25 years in the UK).

Chris singles out accent as a differentiating characteristic, which, he speculates, might have had negative effects. This indicates an awareness that accent might be problematic, and also that the processes of stigmatisation can be subtle, whereby the individual is not in a position to ascertain their presence. Chris refers to a 'British', standard way of speaking as the benchmark against which he assumes he is judged as a non-native speaker. His comment also alludes to the formal institutional practice of performance measurement, such as student evaluations, and how it might create a way for negative evaluations of accent to take official form. Linked to the increased emphasis on customer orientation in higher education (Budd, 2017) is an institutional mechanism shaping the conditions under which stigmatisation occurs.

In internationalised British universities, non-native accents are not only subject to appraisal by native speakers but are also evaluated by non-native speakers of English. In contrast to interactions with native speakers, a foreign accent is not necessarily perceived as a disadvantage in relation to the latter group. The statement from Andrew, below, illustrates this point:

International students, because of my accent, seem to understand me easier than sometimes they understand other people (Andrew, 35, Senior Lecturer, 12 years in the UK).

Rather than being a cause of frustration and the target of possible modification, accent is here framed as a source of a positive difference and uniqueness (Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010a; Moyer, 2007). Since the effects of accent, at least as far as the comprehensibility of speech is concerned, are connected to the linguistic competence of the listeners, the potential stigma can be turned into an advantage for the SIE working in a non-native language. Andrew's example prompts an interesting observation: In a situation where native and non-native speakers are jointly present, the speaker's accent is possibly simultaneously being evaluated both in favourable and unfavourable terms. This highlights the multiplicity and complexity characterising evaluations of the various aspects of difference that SIEs are subject to, be it by others or by themselves. That these evaluations are seen as to some extent negotiable means that individuals may consciously try to influence them, a point we elaborate on below.

Influencing accent-related differentiation

A number of participants referred to the impediment a non-native accent may present to effective communication. Most of the SIEs in our sample assumed sole responsibility for ensuring that others could understand them, exemplified by Natalie's statement that

It is OK to be a foreigner, but you still have to make the language understandable (Natalie, 38, Lecturer, 12 years in the UK).

When interacting with native English speakers, some participants explained how they make a deliberate effort to modify their accent, or to mitigate its effects:

I try to make up for [my accent] by repeating myself and rephrasing arguments. I am aware that I may be consistently mispronouncing words so my hope is that the probability of getting myself understood increases by saying things [...]. Poor people, I repeat myself more than I should (David, 32, Senior Lecturer, 10 years in the UK).

David refers to the altering of pace and pronunciation, and repetition and rephrasing as ways to improve listeners' understanding. A 'neutral' accent is often considered crucial in professional settings (Nath, 2011). And in the context of the increased internationalisation of UK academia and the subsequent occurrence of a broader register of spoken English, accent is pinpointed as a source of negative experiences for international academics (ECU, 2013), notwithstanding Gluszek et al.'s (2011) suggestion that higher education might be a professional environment tolerant to linguistic differences. David specifically frames his accent as a weakness. In the process, however, he runs the risk of reinforcing the negative stereotype (Link & Phelan, 2001) of a 'linguistically deficient foreigner' who must adjust to the norm.

Several participants exhibit accent-based stigma consciousness (Pinel, 1999), as we have seen in some of the examples above; wishing they had less of an accent or attempting to modify their speech. More rarely does an awareness of the potentially stigmatising effects of accent lead to a conscious decision to resist modification, as in the following example:

The accent thing, which I am determined not to work on, first because I don't think I could do much about it at this stage but second it's part of who I am, part of me, and I can't see a reason why I should work on my accent [...] but I realise that it does have an impact upon how people see me (Anne, 34, Senior Lecturer, 12 years in the UK).

Rather than attempting to mitigate accent-based differentiation through adjusting her pronunciation, Anne chooses to embrace it as an integral part of herself, thus not accepting the stereotype (see Slay & Smith, 2011). However, she also shows awareness of a culturally endorsed idea that accent is a potentially devaluing attribute, which can produce negative evaluations by others, and a reductive view of oneself (Link & Phelan, 2013). This points to acknowledging that the effects for SIEs of speaking with a non-native accent go beyond evaluations of speech clarity and comprehensibility, as they are potentially linked to prejudice and discrimination. We elaborate on this in the next section.

Accent, prejudice and discrimination

A non-native accent might become the basis of explicit discriminatory behaviours directed at the non-native speaker (Derwing & Munro, 2009), indications of which are present in the empirical material. Peter, for example, describes an experience of what he considers prejudice against him as a non-native English-speaking academic:

I have had some comments [about my accent], when [students] do the evaluations. This was on a module which wasn't very popular anyway. It was stats [statistics]. And of course, if they don't understand everything... it's natural to blame, if you want to blame someone, you will blame him or her on something which is sticking out, like the accent. [On] the same module done by other people who are British, [the students] got the same marks, so it's not, like, what I'm doing or who I am is affecting student learning (Peter, 34, Senior Lecturer, 5 years in the UK).

Peter expresses a sense of having been unfairly singled out in student evaluations due to his accent though, to his account, there is no evidence of poor student performance to

warrant such feedback. Yet, accent becomes the attribute onto which dissatisfaction is projected as students exercise their power to evaluate their lecturers as part of institutionally formalised feedback monitoring; as a result of which Peter sees himself as labelled inferior to native speaking faculty. Peter's example indicates that since linguistic discrimination is deemed more 'acceptable' than discrimination based on, for example, gender or race (Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010a), accent may be used explicitly as a scapegoat attribute to devalue an individual's work and professional competence (Coupland & Bishop, 2007).

The link between a non-native accent and bias against the non-native speaking SIE may also manifest in interactions with peer academics:

This [university] is a kind of stronghold of the British people [...] There was something I was talking about [in a meeting] and someone misheard me a couple of times [...] And the mishearing became much more loaded than actually a misunderstanding could have been. There was something else there going on and therefore I didn't re-say it because [...] I believe that if you actually work in an [international] university, then the minimum you can do is to get used to different accents (Sarah, 35-39, Senior Lecturer, 12 years in the UK).

Sarah points to a paradox she has observed and experienced within the current UK HE system: While internationalisation is actively promoted in the name of competitive success, the need for mutual adjustments to the resulting change in organisational dynamics is not always acknowledged. Sarah refuses to give in to what she interprets as a sign of prejudice, but in doing so also runs the risk of not getting her message across.

Discussion

As UK academia has become more internationalised, there has been an increase in non-British faculty, a specific occupational group of self-initiated expatriates. As with other SIEs, international academics are presented with the challenge of adapting to the new working environment, and their position as an expatriate will have an impact on their experience at work, their career progression and on the employing organisation. The challenges faced by SIEs are often discussed with reference to ‘adaptation’ and ‘adjustment’ (e.g., Farcas & Gonçalves, 2019; Harrison, Shaffer, & Bhaskar-Shrinivas, 2004; Haslberger, Brewster, & Hippler, 2014). However, to gain further insights into the SIE experience we need to pay attention to how this category of employees understands their own position in relation to particular groups within the institutional context, including processes of stratification and potential discrimination through stigmatisation. In the case of our participants, expressions of norms – such as referring to British native speakers – signify how privileged groups are delineated in particular situations to serve as points of reference. Often, the power relations supporting such groups remain unquestioned (Kalonaityte, 2010), and hence their position unchallenged. Our study shows how such relations are partly (re)produced by the non-native speaking SIEs who internalise the possibility of stigmatisation and act in ways that result in its reinforcement. Our research demonstrates how, through actions rooted in an internalised assumption about the damaging effects of accent, SIEs can reinforce the power effects of stigmatisation, contributing to the hierarchical distinction between ‘local’ and ‘international’ academics.

Our findings demonstrate the importance of verbal language use for SIEs' experience and careers and shed light on the potential aspects of disadvantage that are not directly related to language but that SIEs face due to being non-native language users. In an officially monolingual, in this case Anglophone, setting standard English provides a tacit norm according to which speakers are evaluated when multiple varieties of spoken English are present. The evaluation, however, does not simply concern their adherence to the standard norm – a complex process in itself – but also their extralinguistic capabilities. These, for example, include the perceived level of their professional expertise, and the degree of their ability to understand and communicate knowledge. Such evaluations are not officially acknowledged nor necessarily consciously exercised, yet they are powerful, if subtle, means of creating and reinforcing social boundaries between local and expatriate staff.

Being subtle, accent-based stigmatisation is often difficult to identify. By exploring the experiences of those at risk of stigmatisation we are able to establish to which extent, if at all, attributed differences are questioned and resisted by the SIEs. In order for resistance to take place, an awareness of the stigmatising effects of a particular attribute is needed, which, as our research has demonstrated, is not always the case. Some organisational differences have gained overt recognition through legislation and policy practice (Kirton & Greene, 2009; Özbilgin & Tatli, 2011) while others, such as accent, are not considered to be significant bases of differentiation. This is particularly important for SIEs working in Anglophone contexts since the lack of recognition given to differentiating effects of non-native accents limits the possibilities for raising concerns and counter-acting potential stigmatisation. Among the participants there were few examples of resistance, and the actions taken by individuals did not involve the explicit voicing of the experienced negative effects of their

accent. Such examples illustrate the difficulty of openly referring to particular differences even when their negative effects are felt. This has implications for organisations employing SIEs in terms of the need of raising awareness and creating organisational support for articulating and addressing concerns. In this regard, it is important that, similar to anti-discrimination and unconscious bias training in relation to other aspects of diversity, such as gender and ethnicity, all staff – both local and SIE – should develop knowledge regarding how and with what consequences accents can influence judgements about non-native speakers. Further, training for staff should address the development of an understanding that when communicating with each other, all employees, regardless of their place of origin, should make an effort to understand and be understood by others.

Conclusion

With its increased emphasis on internationalisation and marketisation, higher education displays characteristics common to many other sectors with a significant proportion of highly qualified SIEs. In this context, the category ‘international academic’, while by no means homogeneous, gives rise to diversity issues that need to be understood and addressed in addition to those that have traditionally been the focus of organisational diversity management. Our proposed conceptual approach is suitable for analyses in different organisational settings that employ SIEs – who, like academics, are highly qualified, tend to relocate to the host country long-term, do not necessarily occupy senior positions in organisational hierarchies (Cerdin, 2013; Dickmann et al., 2018; Doherty, 2013) and, due to their foreignness, are likely to experience prejudice and other obstacles in their careers.

It is worth noting that in discussing the role of accent in SIE experience, for analytical purposes, we have not differentiated *between* non-native accents. It should, however, be acknowledged that accents are differently evaluated due to their cultural, historical and political connotations. As such, the impact of the accent with which a SIE speaks will vary depending on their country or region of origin. How specific non-native accents produce differentiation is a subject worthy of further investigation. Further, with regard to future research, in order to account for the complexity of the SIE experiences and careers, we see it as important to continue conducting more studies informed by approaches developed within organisation studies in general and, in particular, critical diversity research.

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