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Language Attitudes, diversity and inclusivity.

Abstract:

Do you pronounce your [r] in words like 'car' or 'never'? Do you drop your [t] in a way that 'what' sounds like 'wha' (t) and 'better' sounds like be'er? Whether or not you pronounce your [r]s or drop your [t]s might sound trivial, inconsequential. But studies show that people's attitudes towards a person's dialect or accent could limit their employment and educational possibilities, not to mention diminished self-esteem.

This presentation aims to encourage you to reflect on own and your students' attitudes and unconscious bias about regional and foreign accents. It shall attempt to provoke you to seriously consider if accentism is really a more socially acceptable form of racism, sexism or classism. Indeed, the way we pronounce words or speak with a regional or foreign accent indexes a particular membership to a speech community. It tells the listener not only our geographic origin but also our ethnicity and our social class background (Holmes 2013).

Research shows that more than a quarter of Britons feel discriminated against because of their regional accent. Another study suggests that 80% of employers admit to having used regional accents as a factor in hiring decisions. Additionally, The Times Higher Education reports that UK University students with regional accents feel marginalized and tend to keep quiet during lectures for fear of being ridiculed.

This presentation explores an out-of-class initiative on language attitudes involving first year students of the module Introduction to Discourse, Language and Society. The class made audiorecordings of three of their classmates with different accents. They then asked their friends to listen to said recordings and rate the speaker according to a set of criteria (friendly-unfriendly, educated-uneducated, and so on). This cohort of students also engaged in a debate about gendered talk and tackled the issue of whether or not women should change the way they talk to be perceived as more confident, more competent. Insights from the students' out-of-class activity and debate have important implications as to how Edinburgh Napier can better enhance diversity and inclusivity.

Havergal, C. (2016). Students with regional accents "ridiculed and silenced." The Times Higher Education. Retrieved from <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/students-with-regional-accent-ridiculed-and-silenced>

Holmes, J. (2013). An Introduction to Sociolinguistics. (Routledge, Ed.) (4th ed.). London and New York.