

## Special issue: Linguistic discrimination and cultural diversity in social spaces

*Nicole Baumgarten and Inke Du Bois*

When we create a job posting we still have the old person in mind who previously held the position. Throughout the hiring process, from creating a profile, generating a job ad, sighting application documents and conducting the job interview, we think of the status quo. We think in the old categories but we must find new ones, we must think of the future and find new criteria. We are not able to hold on to the status quo as our societies are changing.

(Human Resources staff member's comment in an intercultural training session on hiring bias, *my translation IDB*)

The comment above, made by a Human Resources manager during an intercultural training session on implicit bias in recruitment, is an example of how, in decision-makers' minds, entrenched 'old' social categories continue to be used for screening people and assessing their suitability for a job – despite apparent changes in the sociocultural make-up of the surrounding community and sometimes despite decision-makers' better knowledge and judgement. Language is one of the most prominent vehicles that listeners use for inferring this kind of social information about the speaker. Whoever is able to speak in ways that can be associated with desirable social categories is likely to be evaluated as a socially desirable person – the best for the job, a good tenant, unlikely to default on a mortgage,

### Affiliations

Nicole Baumgarten: University of Sheffield, UK.

email: [n.baumgarten@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:n.baumgarten@sheffield.ac.uk)

Inke Du Bois: University of Bremen, Germany.

email: [dubois@uni-bremen.de](mailto:dubois@uni-bremen.de)

unlikely to have committed a crime, or from a nice part of the world. The way we speak makes us the target of evaluative judgements by our interlocutors. When ways of speaking are drawn upon in socially consequential decision-making processes, language effectively serves as a proxy for other forms of discrimination, that is, against social categories such as ethnic or regional origin, gender, age or level of education (Lippi-Green 2012; Ng 2007; Roberts, Davies and Jupp 1992). Making competence in the privileged language of a community an overt or covert requirement for community participation enables social inclusion and exclusion processes, which, intentionally or not, serve the establishment and maintenance of social inequality and inequitable access to pathways of upward social mobility.

The conference ‘Urban futures: language-based discrimination’ was held in the School of Languages and Cultures, at the University of Sheffield, in October 2018. The event was funded by the British Academy under its scheme ‘The humanities and social sciences tackling the UK’s international challenges’. It brought together interdisciplinary researchers from the United Kingdom and Germany who share an interest in the social consequences of the intersections between language, culture, bias and discrimination. This special issue represents the work presented at that conference and the rigorous, constructive discussion and review of manuscripts that followed.

Linguistic discrimination research grew out of experimental research in social psychology on language attitudes (e.g. Lambert *et al.* 1960) and qualitative ethnographic-linguistic research on communication in multi-ethnic workplaces (e.g. Roberts, Davies and Jupp 1992). The latest methodological addition is Baugh’s (2000) sociophonetic approach, which investigates linguistic prejudice in real-life institutional gatekeeping encounters in quasi-experimental covert research designs. Cumulatively, this research has shown that language – from single phonetic features to pragmatic and interactional choices – is used by people to form impressions of the speaker that connect them in various ways with non-linguistic social categories such as gender, education, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, age or geographical origin, as well as personality traits such as competence or friendliness. The research has also shown that speakers of non-standard varieties tend to be deprived of equal opportunities for socioeconomic participation, while advantages are awarded to standard speakers whose language use can be associated with a real or imagined cultural norm. This norm, furthermore, is often associated with being representative of the ‘nation’ or ‘country’ (Piller 2016).

What appears to be missing at present are investigations that are able to probe into the social complexity of the linguistically and culturally diverse

societies of the early twenty-first century (Piller 2016) and take diversity – namely, the co-presence of languages and cultures in a given social space – as the norm rather than as an exception to a monolingual and monocultural norm. Such research needs to employ ecologically valid methods that are able to address the complex ways in which language intersects with social categories and shapes the quality of community participation for its speakers. This requires novel research designs that mirror real-life communicative interaction; for example, by combining experimental-quantitative and case-based qualitative analyses, including multiple social categories, combining different types of audiovisual stimuli in experiments, involving stakeholders, and including non-native speakers as participants. Further, there is a need to move beyond the micro-linguistic level by critically interrogating the presence of language ideologies in the broader macro-social context. Language ideologies are not only pervasive in public discourse and tend to be uncritically perpetuated in non-linguistic academic research, but they also tend to be reproduced in political decision-making, which is often informed by non-linguistic research; for example, by instituting official language requirements or by treating language as an index of cultural membership, loyalty to a country and nation, or cultural assimilation.

This special issue aims to broaden our understanding of discrimination as an intersection of social, interpersonal and linguistic-communicative processes by bringing together contributions from both the humanities and the social sciences. It explores discrimination in the context of language, ethnicity and social space through a variety of methodological and disciplinary lenses. The articles show how institutional, social and individual forces employ language in order to advantage or disadvantage individuals in social selection processes, which in the longer term can divide communities, fragmenting societies into segregated parallel units, thereby simultaneously invisibilising and problematising diversity. The articles confirm earlier research that showed how language use positions speakers hierarchically vis-à-vis their interlocutors. Beyond that, however, they show how one-dimensional predictions of correlations between linguistic prestige/stigma and socioeconomic success do not accurately capture the outcomes and processes of language-based discrimination – especially when research designs are able to replicate the complexity of everyday interactions in the social settings they seek to explain. It is this attention to the ecological validity of the research that presents an important new departure for language and discrimination research. This special issue covers discrimination in housing markets (Baumgarten, Du Bois and Gill; Du Bois), the legal system (Axer; Wood); access to and attitudes towards elite professions (Rakić; Sharma *et al.*), linguistic prejudice in the question

design for representative population surveys (Adler), and urban segregation in multicultural environments (Breckner). The contributions come from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds, including linguistics, intercultural communication, perceptual dialectology, psychology and urban sociology.

The topic of discrimination is approached from the perspective of linguistic and cultural diversity as the result of forced or voluntary movement within or across national territories (migration). Migration gives rise to heterogeneous populations in any given geographical and social space, allowing pre-existing attitudes towards social groups to shape intercultural interaction. Taking a closer look at contexts in the United Kingdom and Germany, the articles look at discrimination through the prism of diversity as the foundation of social and communicative practices for interpersonal and intergroup differentiation. Notably, in the United Kingdom and in Germany the academic research foci on the social indexicality of language use have been quite different – with more attention paid to regional and social variation in the former and a focus on foreign- and second-language varieties in the latter. This collection of articles represents a central European cross-cultural and cross-linguistic perspective on language and discrimination. It addresses:

- how people notice differences between themselves and other people (language, accent, personal name, speech style, visual cues);
- how people deal with diversity in interpersonal encounters (overt and covert discrimination; preferential treatment);
- the longer-term effects of linguistic prejudice on social spaces (exclusion, homogenisation); and
- methodological challenges and new models of tracing and investigating language attitudes and language-based discrimination (survey and experiment design).

Du Bois' study 'Linguistic discrimination across neighbourhoods: Turkish, US-American and German names and accents in urban apartment search' tested the effects of native and foreign accents and names in relation to their success rates for obtaining appointments for apartment viewings in the German city of Bremen. She tested four different neighbourhoods with distinct native and non-native populations where the Turkish and American accented callers have significantly lower chances than native Germans of obtaining an appointment in the most expensive part of town. She also combines her statistical finding with a micro-level discourse

analysis of one such telephone conversation, in which subtle discriminatory conversational moves are uncovered.

Baumgarten, Du Bois and Gill's 'Patterns of othering minority groups in telephone gatekeeping encounters in the Sheffield property market' is concerned with equitable access to estate agents' services in the United Kingdom. The study focused on the Sheffield owner-occupation housing market and investigated the outcomes and process of telephone gatekeeping encounters between local estate agencies and callers from eight different ethnic majority and minority groups. While there is little evidence for language-based discrimination in terms of gatekeeping outcomes, a comparative discourse analysis shows how majority and minority group callers are treated differently at each stage of the highly scripted telephone encounter, displaying how social inclusion and exclusion can occur while the objective transactional outcomes of service provision are the same.

In their article 'Methods for the study of accent bias and access to elite professions', Sharma and colleagues argue for the necessity of methodological innovation in experimental approaches to accent bias in Britain and its impact on fair access to employment in elite professions. Taking the example of the legal profession and five standard and non-standard British English accents, they describe an integrated approach to the study of linguistic discrimination and social mobility, based on best practices from the fields of linguistics, social psychology and management studies, as well as technological advances in sociophonetics.

Likewise, Wood's contribution 'Guilty by accent?' and Axer's 'British accent perceptions and attributions of guilt by native and non-native speakers' test the effect of British English accents in legal settings; in their cases, however, not from the perspective of the legal professional but from the perspective of the (male) defendant (in traffic accident and date rape cases, respectively). Wood's study presents a prime example of how experimental research into linguistic bias can be successfully masked as non-linguistic research, thereby avoiding priming participants for linguistic features in the stimulus material. Wood's results suggest that in legal cases involving visibly white, middle-class, middle-aged males differentiated by standard and regional accents, the prestigious social categories of maleness, whiteness and class can override simultaneously present accent-based categorisations. Axer's study tested untrained, 'ordinary' speakers' ability to manipulate their speech towards standard and non-standard accents to investigate perceptions of guilt for each speaker's two accent guises. Her results suggest that defendants' ability to modify their accent towards the standard to index conventionally prestigious group membership can

have an impact on how guilty they appear to those involved in the judicial procedure.

Rakić's short research note 'How accent and gender influence perceptions of competence and warmth in the medical profession' shows how gender (male; female), occupation (doctor; nurse) and accent (Standard British English; regional accent) interact in other people's evaluation of the speakers' professional competence and warmth in work interpersonal relationships. The results of this small-scale study highlight the importance of using multiple social categories and different modalities for stimulus presentation to represent the complexity of real-life interactions – in this case the bedside manner of health professionals – in experimental research designs.

Adler's 'Language discrimination in Germany: when evaluation influences objective counting' shows how the survey instruments that are supposed to elicit 'objective' information about the languages used in Germany for representative population statistics are inherently flawed by linguistic bias. The questionnaire design is based on folk linguistic notions of languages and seems to utilise questions on domestic language use as a proxy indicator for cultural affiliation. The biased questions lead to biased results, which warp information about linguistic and cultural diversity in Germany. Adler argues that in particular in population censuses – because they are assumed to produce knowledge and 'truth' about a society, which can be used to legitimate political action – linguistically informed question design is necessary in order to prevent misrepresentations of cultural diversity elicited via the proxy of language.

The special issue concludes with Ingrid Breckner's contextualising commentary on language-based discrimination from the perspective of urban sociology. Breckner conducts cutting-edge multidisciplinary research on urban issues such as urban renewal, suburbanisation, social capital and dynamics in urban spaces. Her work on diversity in urban spaces is related to multilingualism, migration, demography and gender. In 'Discrimination in social spaces: the role of language in perceptions of otherness', she highlights the difficulty of transdisciplinary communication about common concerns – in particular from the humanities into the social sciences – which often hinder collaborative action in the development of new understandings and approaches. The article offers an outlook on the challenges and opportunities for further interdisciplinary work related to discrimination in social spaces.

Nicole Baumgarten and Inke Du Bois  
November 2019

## References

- Baugh, J. (2000) Racial identification by speech. *American Speech* 75(4): 362–4. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00031283-75-4-362>
- Lambert, W., Hodgson, R. C., Gardener, R. C. and Fillenbaum, S. (1960) Evaluational reactions to spoken languages. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 60: 44–51. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0044430>
- Lippi-Green, R. (2012) *English with an Accent: Language, Ideology, and Discrimination in the United States*, 2nd edn. London, New York: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203348802>
- Ng, S. H. (2007) Language-based discrimination: blatant and subtle forms. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* 26(2): 106–22. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0261927X07300074>
- Piller, I. (2016) *Linguistic Diversity and Social Justice: An Introduction to Applied Sociolinguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199937240.001.0001>
- Roberts, C., Davies, E. and Jupp, T. (1992) *Language and Discrimination: A Study of Communication in Multi-ethnic Workplaces*. London: Longman.