

## “You’ve Gotta Change Your Accent”: An Online Discourse Community’s Language Ideologies on Accentedness in Higher Education

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**Abstract:** As we move forward in the era of globalization where linguistic diversity is greater than ever, the standard language cultures we live in continue to shape our thoughts about language. One common space dominated by the standard language mindset is the higher education where linguistically diverse faculty are stigmatized by their language, identity, and accent. By studying the discourse on Reddit, an online discourse community, this study expands our understanding of the role that social networking sites play in imposing language ideologies on accentedness in higher education. To explore how the online discourse community’s language ideologies shaped the ways in which they understood and responded to faculty accents, 334 open-access Reddit posts addressing the “accent problem” in educational contexts were compiled and analyzed through a combination of corpus linguistics and critical discourse analysis techniques. Results established that the online discourse community’s discriminatory behavior toward accentedness was grounded in a standard language ideology. Typical manifestations of this ideology included: 1. the subordination of languages and language varieties, 2. the rejection of the responsibility in communicative acts, and 3. the promotion of the non-accent myth. Implications for higher education professionals were discussed in light of the findings.

### Anahtar Sözcükler:

Aksan, dil ideolojisi, çevrimiçi söylem topluluğu, Reddit

### “Aksanını Değiştirmek Zorundasın”: Çevrimiçi Bir Söylem Topluluğunun Yüksek Öğretimde Aksanlık Üzerine Dil İdeolojileri

Dilsel çeşitliliğin her zamankinden daha fazla olduğu küreselleşme çağında ilerlerken, içinde bulunduğumuz standart dil kültürleri dil hakkındaki düşüncelerimizi şekillendirmeye devam etmektedir. Standart dil zihniyetinin baskın olduğu mecralardan biri de dili, kimliği ve aksanı sebebiyle çeşitli tutumlara maruz kalan öğretim üyelerinin bulunduğu yüksek öğretim kurumlarıdır. Bu çalışma çevrimiçi bir söylem topluluğu olan Reddit söylemini inceleyerek, sosyal network sitelerinin yüksek eğitimde aksanlık üzerine dil ideolojilerini empoze etmedeki rolünü anlamayı amaçlamaktadır. Çevrimiçi dil topluluğunun dil ideolojilerinin öğretim üyelerinin aksanlarına olan bakış açılarını nasıl şekillendirdiğini anlamak için eğitim bağlamlarında “aksan problemini” ele alan 334 erişime açık Reddit iletisi derlem bilim ve kritik söylem analizi yöntemleriyle incelenmiştir. Sonuçlar çevrimiçi söylem topluluğunun aksanlığa karşı ayrımcı tutumlarının standart dil ideolojisinden kaynaklandığını göstermiştir. Bu ideolojinin göstergeleri şunlar olmuştur: 1. dil ve lehçelerini alçaltma, 2. iletişimsel eylemlerde sorumluluk almayı reddetme, ve 3. aksansızlık mitini destekleme. Bulguların ışığında yüksek öğretim çalışanları için çıkarımlarda bulunulmuştur.

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## 1. Introduction

Faculty members who are first language speakers of a language other than English have an increasing presence in U.S. higher education institutions (Goatley-Soan & Baldwin, 2018). This phenomenon is attributed to changes in the immigration laws in the 1990s that allowed international scholars to immigrate to the United States (Kim, Wolf-Wendel, & Twombly, 2011). International scholar data from the 2017 Open Doors® report reveal that the top five places of origin of international faculty are China (33.6%), India (9.3%), South Korea (5.4%), Germany (4%), and Canada (3.7%) (Institute of International Education, 2017). The official report also shows that international faculty come from over 200 places across the world. This demonstrates the diversity of faculty demographics in the context of U.S. higher education. Unfortunately, at this point in history where “nativeness in language continues to exert a powerful impact on society” (Brutt-Griffler & Samimy, 2001, p. 99), non-natives continue to be “denigrated by nature of their identities and origins” (Rudolph, Selvi, & Yazan, 2015, p. 32). As we move forward in the era of globalization where linguistic diversity is greater than ever, the perseverance of monolingualism and standard language ideologies is perceivable at all levels of society, and higher education is no exception.

As Lippi-Green (2012) remarks, “there is considerable resistance in this country to teachers with foreign accents, and nowhere is that resistance so loudly voiced as in the university setting” (p. 90). Many undergraduate students consider multilingual faculty to lack the linguistic competence necessary to serve as instructors (Subtirelu, 2015). Furthermore, research shows that students particularly target multilingual instructors’ accented English when they want to create issues (Williams, 2011) because they often perceive the instructors’ accent and pronunciation to be extremely important in classroom learning (Kavas & Kavas, 2008). It is such a serious issue that many students devalue the work and teaching of these academics due to their diverse backgrounds (Chavez & Mitchell, 2020; Heffernan, 2021). University students’ intolerance to faculty accents represents a language-oriented discrimination against non-native speakers of English. While the potential ramifications of this resistance to accented English are complex and critical, the study of language ideologies offers a way of viewing students’ discriminatory behavior on the basis of accents, “ostensibly an issue of language, as connected to broader issues of political power and social exclusion” (Subtirelu, 2015, p. 36). To Lippi-Green (2012), the act of accent discrimination, rejection of the other because of their racial and linguistic identity, derives from a standard language ideology which promotes linguistic homogeneity by imposing the norms of an idealized, rule-bounded, and monolithic language.

A review of the literature demonstrates students’ bias against academics from diverse backgrounds (Bresnahan et al., 2002; Chavez & Mitchell, 2020; Fitch & Morgan, 2003; Heffernan, 2021; Kavas & Kavas, 2008; Smith et al., 2005). These studies, however, mainly dealt with student evaluations of instructors in more public or official settings. Only a handful of studies inquired into the discourse of online communities (Subtirelu, 2015). It is critical to examine online discourse communities because members of these communities hold the potential for shaping public perceptions by establishing certain ideologies. By analyzing the nature of such an online community’s discourse around accentedness, this study aims to expand the field’s understanding of the online discourse communities’ role in establishing certain language ideologies.

### 1.1. Accent Discrimination and Standard Language Ideology

Speakers of many prevailing languages live in standard language cultures where language attitudes are influenced by mainstream ideological positions (Milroy, 2007). These ideological positions are often driven by the supposed existence of a standard variety of language, the most salient characteristics of which are uniformity and invariance. What this means is that “every sound should be pronounced in the same way by every speaker, and that all speakers should use the same grammatical forms and vocabulary items in exactly the same way” (Milroy, 2007, p. 133). Such standardization reinforces the monolingual orientations to language and rejects linguistic variation and heterogeneity, which, in Greenfield’s (2011) view, is linguistically impossible because “no two people in this world speak in exactly the same way” (p. 41). While linguists concur with a view that standardization of language is a futile attempt because variation is inherently attached to all spoken languages (Lippi-Green, 2012), the idea of a standard language continues to be maintained and brings with it various forms of discrimination, starting with the accent. One potential site for accent discrimination to manifest itself is the very center of learning, higher education.

In the past two decades, a great deal of research has been devoted to the study of student evaluations of lectures given by faculty from diverse backgrounds in higher education (Bresnahan et al., 2002; Chavez & Mitchell, 2020; Fitch & Morgan, 2003; Heffernan, 2021; Kavas & Kavas, 2008; Smith et al., 2005; Subtirelu, 2015). In many cases, studies conducted around accented faculty all pointed to similar conclusions – that students are not bias-free in their judgment of faculty with accents. For instance, examining undergraduate students’ evaluations of domestic and international teaching assistants (ITAs), Smith et al. (2005) found that undergraduates consistently rated ITAs lower than domestic teaching assistants in terms of their teaching skills. A similar phenomenon was also observed on RateMyProfessors.com, an online review platform where students rate instructors on a variety of criteria (e.g., clarity, helpfulness, easiness, accessibility, etc.) and leave comments on the instructors and courses. Critical discourse analysis of this site revealed that students rated Asian instructors significantly lower than American instructors, particularly for clarity (Subtirelu, 2015). While students often described Asian instructors to be difficult to understand, the discourse around their comments revealed that although students stigmatized accented instructors, they acknowledged the instructors’ ability to compensate for communication difficulties resulting from accents. Scrutinizing the scholarship regarding student evaluation of courses and teaching, Heffernan (2021) reached the conclusion that these evaluations are highly prejudiced against academics from diverse backgrounds. Similarly, Chavez and Mitchell (2020) demonstrated in their quasi-experimental study that students are biased against non-natives in their course evaluations.

The extant literature directed attention to intelligibility issues when discussing student evaluations of accented faculty. As Bresnahan et al. (2002) observed, “when intelligibility is high, undergraduates perceive foreign teaching assistants (and foreign friends) as attractive and competent... When intelligibility is low, negative attitudinal and affective responses appear to be primed” (p. 182). In other words, students were often biased against foreign teaching assistants, but when they realized that the foreign teaching assistants were intelligible, they appreciated them more than they might otherwise do. To further illustrate, in a narrative inquiry of 25 undergraduate students’ experiences with ITAs, Fitch and Morgan (2003) reported that “the unintelligible ITA was the culturally common tale” (p. 303). Undergraduates found the accented speech of English problematic and unintelligible, which resulted in misunderstanding. This leads us to the necessity of distinguishing accent from

intelligibility. As Munro (2008) remarks, reduced intelligibility does not necessarily arise from accented speech. Otherwise speaking, intelligibility does not require accent-free pronunciation. In Lindemann’s (2002) view, many times, the “apparent problems of miscommunication that interactants may attribute to the supposed incompetence of non-native speakers may, in fact, be a result of native speakers’ own negative attitudes” (p. 439) because a strong relationship existed between undergraduate native speaker students’ attitudes toward non-native speakers and their perceptions of the success of their interactions with this group of speakers.

Previous research has thus far described college students’ evaluations of the academics drawing on data from interviews, narratives, questionnaires, and/or the literature (Bresnahan et al., 2002; Chavez & Mitchell, 2020; Fitch & Morgan, 2003; Heffernan, 2021; Kavas & Kavas, 2008; Smith et al., 2005). These descriptive studies led to the conduction of intervention studies to mitigate the problems associated with accented speech that instructors from diverse linguistic backgrounds produce (Kang et al., 2015; Smith et al., 2005; Villarreal, 2013). Although the existing literature largely dealt with student evaluations of instructors in more public or official settings, there is limited research on online discourse communities (Subtirelu, 2015). As De Choudhury and De (2014) state, online discussion forums “provide a rich ecosystem to study the variety of self-disclosure, social support, and disinhibition” (p. 71). Such public discourses are worthy of study because they play a significant role in establishing ideologies shaping public perceptions. This study, therefore, examines a particular online discourse platform, Reddit, to understand users’ orientations towards accentedness in higher education. Although the online discourse communities developed on Reddit have been examined by researchers in diverse fields, an applied linguistics study on language ideologies regarding the issue of accentedness in higher education is not one of them. The current study is an attempt to fill the stated gap in the literature to contribute to the scholarship’s understanding of online discourse communities and the language ideologies that these communities promote.

## **2. Method**

### **2.1. Research Design**

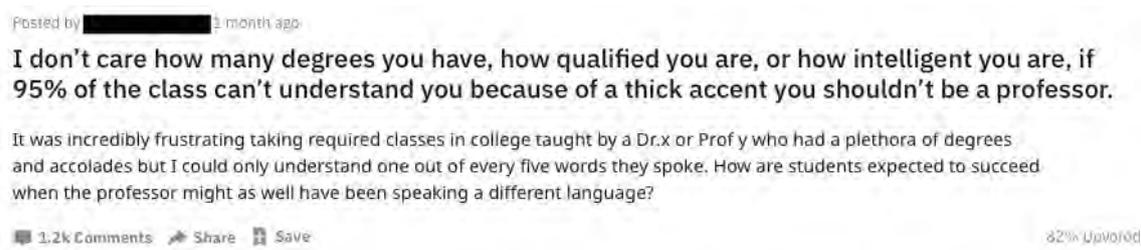
A mixed-method research design was employed in the current study with a combination of corpus linguistic techniques and critical discourse analysis. The rationale for integrating the two analytical approaches was to offset the limitations inherent to using each approach and to enhance their methodological strengths. Corpus linguistics is advantageous for its extensive use of computers in the linguistic inquiry of authentic texts (Biber, Conrad, & Reppen, 2006). However, it is “constrained in terms of their ability to draw on the broader contexts in which discourse is produced. CDA, in contrast, is highly attentive to such context” (Subtirelu, 2015, p. 45). On the other hand, critical discourse studies are criticized as falling short on the identification of generalizable patterns in discourse. To compensate for the weaknesses of the two methodological approaches, Baker et al. (2008) advocate incorporating corpora and corpus linguistic techniques into critical discourse studies. In this study, a corpus-driven analysis serves to conduct an initial analysis to understand the nature of the data. Following that, a critical discourse analysis helps reveal the ideologies in which the data is grounded.

## 2.2. Reddit.com: Context and Function

Reddit is a social news website that hosts thousands of communities, a massive assemblage of forums, and authentic discussions. Reddit users (also known as Redditors) worldwide can share content by posting stories, links, images, and videos within subsidiary threads, which are called subreddits. Each subreddit focuses on a single theme or topic and builds its own community. Redditors can subscribe to specific subreddits or communities and comment on the posts published by other users. An important feature of Reddit is that it permits its users to be completely anonymous because Redditors can sign up the site without an official e-mail address, and they can remain confidential using monikers rather than real names. This feature allows users to express their opinions freely and openly (Chang-Kredl & Colannino, 2017). Also, the fact that members of online discourse communities such as Reddit “discuss topics without a researcher inferring and possibly influencing the expression of thoughts” (Holtz, Kronberger, & Wagner, 2012, p. 56) makes Reddit a favorable platform to examine.

## 2.3. Data Collection

The data of the current study were collected from an open-access content on Reddit. The data came specifically from comments on the following post that was published on Reddit on January 13, 2019, under the sub r/unpopularopinion:



The data were drawn from Reddit members’ comments on this post. To manage the huge volume of the data, comments which were shared on the same day that the above post was published were extracted from Reddit’s website. To further ease the data load, only level-one comments were collected. Consequently, comments at other levels that present interactions between Reddit members were not analyzed, which is beyond the scope of the current study. These procedures generated 436 comments, of which three were deleted by the users, two were hyperlinks, and one was shared twice. At the end, 430 comments were gathered for analysis.

## 2.4. Data Analysis

Corpus linguistic techniques can be useful in the beginning of an analytic process to understand the data under analysis. Therefore, a corpus-driven analysis was conducted in this study to understand the nature of the data set by identifying the most common words in Reddit comments. This process was as follows: the word document (.docx) on which the data were copy-pasted was converted to a text document (.txt) through an online media converter. The textual data were analyzed through AntConc (Anthony, 2014), a freeware corpus analysis program designed for concordancing and text analysis. The program’s Word List tool was run to generate a word list by frequency and find the most frequently used content words in the corpus.

For a closer examination, critical discourse analysis was implemented to examine the discourse around language ideologies and accentedness. The word document that included 430 comments from the Reddit website was imported to NVivo (QSR International, 2014), a qualitative data analysis software program, and all data were coded electronically. The coding process began with reading each comment to make sense of its content, and the content was coded at nodes, which refers to the container for a collection of references about a specific theme in NVivo. Once all the data were coded, the nodes were reviewed in order to ensure that the references were categorized as they should be. Afterwards, the nodes were organized in hierarchies from general themes (parent nodes) to more specific categories (child nodes). At the end of coding the data, key references were selected from each node to be presented in this article.

Worth noting, the data included 96 comments that were coded at the node “irrelevant”. These comments were not directly related to faculty accents. For instance, Redditors discussed their experiences with accents in contexts outside the academy (e.g., medical doctors’ accents in hospitals, a priest’s accent in the church, etc.). Irrelevant comments also included descriptions of professors’ job responsibilities without regard to accentedness (e.g., “A professor is hired to do active research by the university and has to teach 1-2 classes as a formality.”). Political inferences (e.g., “Voted for Trump, didn’t you?”), racism discussions (e.g., “I guess this is how racism begins.”), and remarks about the educational system (e.g., “USA system makes education an industry all to itself.”) were other types of comments that were coded at the node “irrelevant”. For the purposes of this article, the irrelevant posts were removed from the inquiry, which left a total of 334 comments for corpus linguistic and discourse analysis.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Corpus-Driven Analysis: Word Frequency

This study utilized corpus linguistics techniques to understand the nature of the data collected. The analysis of the data began by examining the most common words from the corpus of Reddit comments to provide an indication of the topics. Table 1 presents the frequencies of the 20 most frequent words that appeared in 334 Reddit comments.

Table 1.

*Top 20 Words in the Reddit Corpus (total word count: 17,492)*

Word	<i>f</i>	Word	<i>f</i>
professor	214	student	73
accent	204	people	72
understand	172	learn	66
class	169	time	56
English	103	language	54
teach	99	think	47
thick	93	hard	46
speak	87	college	45
say	83	university	39
teacher	82	agree	39

*f* = raw frequency of the word

Table 1 indicates that professors’ accent was a frequent topic in the corpus of Reddit comments. As seen in the table, *professor*, *accent*, and *understand* were the three most frequently appearing words in the corpus of 334 Reddit comments. These three words signal a conversation around the topic of understanding professors with an accent. Of particular

interest to the current study is the frequency of the words that indicate the discussions of language, such as *accent*, *English*, and *language*. The frequency of words, including *professor*, *class*, *teach*, *teacher*, *student*, *learn*, *college*, and *university*, provides an indication of the context, people, and setting involved in the Redditors’ conversations. The two most common adjectives, *thick* and *hard*, denote the possibility of negative attributes associated with faculty accents. Amidst the most frequently occurring words, *agree* gestures the Redditors’ concurrence with the original post voicing the “accent problem” in college settings.

Basic corpus linguistic activities, such as running a concordance of the data set, can be a revealing first introduction to the nature of the data. However, to understand the ideologies that the data set is grounded in, a more critical examination is in order. In this attempt, what follows is a documentation of the results rendered from a critical discourse analysis of the data.

### 3.2. Critical Discourse Analysis: Language Ideologies

Besides identifying the words that provide an indication of the topics, the current study utilized a critical discourse analysis to take a closer look at the discursive features that establish language ideologies undergirding the Reddit comments around accentedness. Table 2 presents the results from coding 334 Reddit comments.

Table 2.

#### *Coding of the 334 Reddit Comments*

Themes	<i>f</i> (%)*	Nodes	<i>f</i> (%)	Examples
Standard Language Ideology, Linguistic Homogeneity, Monolingualism	191 (57%)	Communication, comprehensibility, intelligibility	94**	can’t communicate, incomprehensible, unintelligible, indecipherable accent, too heavy an accent to understand, impenetrable, never understood a word
		Failure, course drop/withdrawal, self-teaching	70	failed the exam, made me need tutoring, over half the class dropped, switched it after second day, had to teach myself, doing the lessons on my own
		Denigration, discrimination, accent reduction	43	accent is so f...ing grating and sounds utterly disgusting, horrific accent, shitty teachers, get out of my country, you’ve gotta change your accent, take English diction courses
Plurilinguality, Linguistic Heterogeneity, Multilingualism	61 (18%)	Responsibility, communicative burden sharing	38	just listen, pay a little more attention, listen actively,
		Openness, variation, linguistic facts	33	work harder to understand, make more of an attempt to listen, put in time and effort to learn to understand languages exist in variation, English is an international and polycentric language so people speak it differently, the real world isn’t full of people with the exact same accent as you

*f* = frequency of occurrence. *Note*\* Of 334 comments, 73 (22%) were coded at the node N/A as these comments did not reveal a particular orientation toward accentedness (e.g., I read this as my professor with a thick accent was going over the syllabus) and 9 (3%) comments were coded at the node Neutral which demonstrated impartiality (e.g., My personal experience was a mixed bag). \*\* The possibility of a comment to be coded at more than one node causes total percentages to exceed 100%.

### 3.2.1. Standard Language Ideology, Linguistic Homogeneity, Monolingualism

A critical analysis of the Reddit discourse made it clear that a standard language ideology was evident in the online discourse community’s comments on faculty accents. Promoting linguistic homogeneity and a monolingual worldview, this ideology manifested the imposition of linguistic purism by means of discouraging variation and diversity in language. The ideological orientation to language standardization was observed in three cases.

First, the most commonly observed indicative of a standard language ideology in the Reddit discourse had to do with communication. To many Redditors, accent was a barrier to communication, and it restricted their ability to understand the message being put across by the non-standard English speaker. Addressing this issue directly, a Redditor stated:

*I completely agree with this. My RE teacher has a heavy Italian accent. Literally no one in the class knows what he’s saying and we fail every test because of this. Sure, knowledge is key when being a teacher but so is communication skills. If a class don’t understand what you’re saying then you’re not cut out for the job.*

This comment demonstrates the effects of standard language ideology as it presents the fallacious mindset that accent is an impediment to understanding, and communication with an accented speaker is doomed to fail.

Second, as evident in the former example, Redditors opined that faculty’s accented English hinders their academic success. Redditors put the finger on their instructors for failing classes in which they could not understand the subject matter due to the instructor’s accented speech. With this bias toward language, some Redditors reported to have withdrawn from or dropped classes taught by accented faculty, while others “had to” teach themselves to avoid failure.

*My solid state teacher (senior undergrad physics class... required for graduation btw) was some Venezuelan prof who could barely string together an understandable sentence in English. (edit: for clarity’s sake, she began teaching college in the US within just a couple of months of stepping off the plane into the US for the first time ever). We ALL did so poorly that we as a class filed protest. (and no, clever snipers, we weren’t stupid, the teacher simply failed at her job, since her communication skills were that of foreign person without **any** command of the English language). We won that protest. I doubt the Jesuit university fired her though. They had an agenda that went well beyond education.*

Such comments were common in the discourse of Reddit which perpetuated the assumption that the world we live in is linguistically homogeneous and it is the accented language user’s fault that misunderstandings occur and lead to failure.

Third, one of the most salient ways in which a standard language ideology affected Redditors’ perceptions was the denigration of language users by their accents. By stigmatizing, belittling, and peripheralizing the speakers of different varieties of English, the Redditors fostered the propagation against the social acceptance of and employment to instructors speaking English with an accent. This mindset is demonstrated clearly in the following post:

*Had to drop a required course in economics last semester because the Prof had a heavy Turkish accent and could barely speak English. I’m now finishing up my second year, and to my disappointment, have had to endure far too many of these kinds of teachers. Though despite my parents being professors at my university and **working diligently with me to avoid these unfit individuals**, I’ve*

*come to realize that it’s a natural part of university and what universities supposedly “stand for” (which is a crock of shit).*

*tl;dr: I agree with you OP, these people shouldn’t be teaching.*

This post and alike remind us of the perseverance of monolingualist dispositions in college classrooms. These dispositions shape the institutional ecologies of higher education where diversity should not be condemned but celebrated to create a safe space for learning to take place.

Furthermore, believing that it is possible for instructors to substitute their accented English for a specific variety of English, the Redditors assume that the communicative burden falls by all means on the stigmatized. Consider the following post: “*this IS an American school with an American student paying upwards of 15-30K per semester... would it be the professor who should adapt?*”.

### 3.2.2. Plurilinguality, Linguistic Heterogeneity, Multilingualism

The accent discourse on Reddit revolved predominantly around standard language ideology and its impositions. However, dispositions toward linguistic diversity were also visible in the Reddit community’s discourse when it came to accents. One of the most interesting insights from the Reddit discourse on accentedness was the importance of responsibility in establishing understanding. The underlying assumption of this argument was that it was possible to achieve successful communication when confronted with an accent by making an effort to become actively involved in the communicative act.

*In my classes with professors with accents, I usually could understand them just fine if I actually listened and engaged with the material. Most of my peers who struggled seemed to snicker about the prof’s accent and then completely turn their brain off because of it. So many students were simply turned off the idea that they’d actually have to actively listen they didn’t even try.*

The outcome of this comment is that communicative burden sharing, the acceptance of responsibility to exchange information in social interaction, is crucial to successful communication.

Challenging the monolingual orientations to language, a smaller group of Redditors acknowledged the linguistic variation and legitimacy of different varieties, instead of privileging a particular variety of English, i.e., the standard English. Diversity-oriented dispositions toward language were manifested in expressions of openness to different varieties of English and accents. Often times, this openness was developed from positive experiences with accents. For instance, describing the aftermath of such an experience, a Redditor explained, “*one of the best professors I’ve had was from Ghana... Super thick accent that took all of us part of an afternoon to get accustomed to (like most accents.)*”. Several Redditors seemed to develop sensitivity to accentedness in educational contexts because they recognized the possibility of coming into contact with diverse Englishes in their lives beyond school. Another factor that contributed to Redditors’ appreciation for diversity had to do with the awareness of linguistic facts of life. The most compelling example of this was:

*What makes you think the accent you want is the “right” one? :-)* Languages exist in variation, there are dialects which sometimes are much more different than what you may find in the USA. Only few languages have so little variation that people are quick to complain for not being used to it. -- Which language are you talking about? I agree some US American profs are ununderstandable for not moving their lips under their beards ;-)

This Redditor made the case for the linguistic facts of life by acknowledging that languages vary and accents are equal; there is not one “correct” accent that is idealized and standardized for all language users.

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

This study examined an online discourse community’s comments on faculty accents in higher education to understand the language ideologies underlying these comments. Although previous studies offered insights into the student perceptions of accented faculty, an examination of more online discourse communities was in order to understand what is happening on social networking sites where users establish ideologies by sharing unfiltered thoughts and comments. Adding to past research, this study showed that in many cases, a standard language ideology was evident in the discourse of Redditors on accented faculty. Redditors often attributed the communication difficulties to faculty accents. However, Lippi-Green (2012) argues that in many cases, “breakdown of communication is due not so much to accent as it is to negative social evaluation of the accent in question, and a rejection of the communicative burden” (p. 73). Redditors’ complaints about the incomprehensibility of faculty accents gesture their refusal of responsibility in communicative acts. For these Redditors, the communicative burden being on the other party, it is not their fault that they don’t understand the material; it is the instructors’ fault that they speak with an accent.

Redditors’ call on instructors to “change” or “grow out of” their accents through “speech therapy” or “English diction courses” demonstrates how they view accents as “inherently undesirable and in need of repair” (Munro, 2008, p. 193). This takes us to the conclusion that in the minds of many people, accent reduction is indeed a possibility. Describing accent reduction as a poorly motivated concept, Munro (2008) reminds us that having an accent is “not a disorder” (p. 194), but a “part of normal variation in human speech” (p. 213). In fact, the biological facts of human language acquisition indicate that it is not possible for an adult to lose or replace their accents (Lippi-Green, 2012). Defining the notion of non-accent as a myth that originates from another myth, the standard language ideology, Lippi-Green (2012) argues that variation is inherent to all spoken languages, and accents are natural outcomes of this variation. Consequently, the myth of non-accent is in conflict with the linguistic facts of life, and it has serious implications for language users, leading to problematic conceptions and actions such as refusing responsibility in the communicative process and putting the full burden on the other party.

Redditors were consistent in their agreement over the difficulty of understanding instructors speaking English with an accent, a finding that concurs with previous studies (Fitch & Morgan, 2003; Subtirelu, 2015; Villarreal, 2013). The results also support past research revealing students’ attribution of academic failure to faculty accents (Fitch & Morgan, 2003) and their tendency to withdraw from or drop classes taught by accented faculty (Rao, 1995; Villarreal, 2013). It seems clear from the results of this study that a standard language ideology informs the current online discourse community’s response to accentedness in the context of educational settings and the non-accent myth validates the community’s expectations about language. As Lippi-Green (2012) puts it, “members of the dominant language group feel perfectly empowered to reject their responsibility, and to demand that a person with an accent carry the majority of the burden in the communicative act” (p. 72). The communicative burden being on the accented faculty, the Redditors examined in this study reckon that it is not their fault that they don’t understand the message being put across; rather, it is the faculty’s fault that they speak with an accent. Such unequal distribution of the

communicative burden is associated with language subordination and language-based discrimination.

Language subordination refers to the process of valorizing the impositions of standard language ideology on speakers of different accents or varieties of English by means of stigmatizing their languages and linguistic identities (Lippi-Green, 2012). The discourse on Reddit demonstrates how language subordination is actualized by the internet community on one of the most popular social networking platforms. Instructors speaking English with an accent were subordinated by means of trivialization, marginalization, and threats of exclusion. Examples of trivialization included mockery of accents (e.g., “*we had a math teacher named Mr. Xu and everyone made fun of his very thick Chinese accent*”) and scornful mimicry (e.g., “*I signed up for international business. Unbeknownst to me, it was actually, “intataional biznef*”). Marginalization occurred when foreign faculty were denigrated for the ways in which they spoke English (e.g., “*his accent was more Russian than any cheesy 80’s action movie villain*”). Explicit threats were also visible in the Reddit discourse, especially for academic employment (e.g., “*if you can’t communicate, you can’t teach*”).

The results from this study establish that although a standard language ideology was dominant in the discourse of Reddit, there were cases where the community members recognized and embraced different ways of using the English language. Looking over the factors contributing to such appreciation for difference, it is possible to draw connections between openness to diverse Englishes and linguistic awareness, lived experiences, and the degree of burden sharing. Therefore, as Lippi-Green (2012) suggests, “students have to be educated about matters of language and communication in the classroom, and be taught to take a reasonable amount of responsibility for a successful educational experience” (p. 96). Students should be taught that linguistic differences, variances, dialects or accents hardly become barriers if both parties take responsibility and share the burden of communication. One way to challenge the standard language ideology and the monolingual worldview that many students in the U.S. higher education strongly hold onto is to make sociolinguistics courses mandatory, or at least bring it into the discussion in first-year liberal studies English courses. Furthermore, students’ openness to linguistic variation should be cultivated through cross-cultural trainings, workshops, and classroom pedagogies. To make communicative efforts visible, a statement that addresses accent differences should be incorporated into course policies. Pedagogical activities should be implemented to help students think about accent as a normal aspect of human language, rather than a problem to eradicate. Multilingual instructors may as well benefit from orientational workshops that help them understand what to expect and how to respond in cases of accent discrimination. Finally, raising awareness about the linguistic facts of life is a must to create the diversity-oriented ecologies that we long for.

As with all empirical studies, the present study has its limitations. This study examined the discourse on one particular online discourse community, Reddit. Therefore, the results cannot be generalized to larger communities that may be socialized into diverse ideological positions. Cross-sectional studies analyzing, comparing, and contrasting multiple communities can generate more conclusive results about the types of language ideologies dominating online discourses. An additional limitation of this study is its sample selection. This study examined the ways in which students responded to faculty accents in higher education. With the fact of communication being a two-way interaction, it is crucial to see the other side of the coin by studying accented faculty’s self-reflections on their teaching practices and communications with students. Future research can highlight whether and how

the standard language cultures they live in inform accented faculty’s teaching and perceptions of the self. To complicate further, inquiries can be made into the perceptions of international students, who come to English-speaking countries to receive education and often have accents themselves. Such research and alike can help us make informed pedagogical decisions to address the “accent problem” in our classrooms and beyond, socializing the society into differences in language.

### Note on Ethical Issues

The author confirms that the study does not need ethics committee approval according to the research integrity rules in their country (Date of Confirmation: 15/09/2022).

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