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**PEOPLE SPEAKING WITH ACCENTS ARE LESS BELIEVABLE**

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Speaking in a foreign accent makes people less credible to native speakers, research shows, just as having a name that is hard to pronounce makes one less likeable. However, it might make more sense to think investment strategies through in a language other than your native tongue.

**Transcript**

**Maria Zijlstra**: 'Maria Zijlstra': that's me! Hard name for you? Either to pronounce or read? Is it disfluent, in other words, in your experience? If so, it'll make it harder for you to like me, as the research of Dr Simon Laham shows, and you can hear and read about that study, called 'The name-pronunciation effect', via the link  provided on the webpage of this week's*Lingua Franca*.

While, in a related topic, on the program today I'm talking to a professor of psychology at the University of Chicago in the States, Boaz Keysar, about the effect that a foreign accent has on credibility.

And Professor. Keysar, you've certainly been involved in some fantastic research. I've been reading bits of them, some great topics, and I'm really keen to quiz you about them, like the one that links an accent, when speaking, with credibility; or should I say lack of credibility.

**Boaz Keysar**: Right! The lead author was my graduate student. Sheri Lev-Ari and I are both Israelis and we both have an accent when we speak English, and we had been thinking about how using a foreign language affects the way that you are perceived. She had this idea that maybe it makes you seem less credible, and the reason that she figured it out is that we know that, in general, when it is harder to process something, then people make attributions that are sort of irrelevant about the text. So, for example, if you read a newspaper that is a little wet and the font is a little smeared—it's harder to read—then you would think that the writer is less intelligent. Why? Because the difficulty of reading the text is misattributed to other things, like the intelligence of the writer. That's a general phenomenon. We thought that accent should work in exactly the same way because it does make it a little harder to understand what the speaker says, the foreign accent. And so we tested that and we found that this is indeed the case.

**Maria Zijlstra**: So this is this phenomenon called processing fluency, it's a really interesting term. There is another example that you've given in this paper that you together have published in which you quote three little words: 'woes unite foes'. And people find that much more believable than if you say: 'woes unite enemies'. It means exactly the same thing but it sounds more fluent, it sounds like it goes together, it runs smoothly through your lips and tongue, perhaps through your mind as well.

**Boaz Keysar**: Exactly. My friend Matt McGlone discovered that, and the point is, as you said, the meaning is basically the same. You know, there might be differences in shades but it's basically the same meaning. So if you believe one you should really believe the other. But just because the one that rhymes is so much easier to process, it does seem more believable.

**Maria Zijlstra**: Just going back to your research then, your subjects in this experiment heard voices making statements such as 'ants don't sleep' or 'a giraffe can go without water longer than a camel can', and they were told that these were prepared statements, they were scripted for the readers rather than that they were what they thought or believed. And the readers either had, well, what you call the native American-English voices, or they had a bit of a foreign accent, or they had a strong accent. And the believability of your speakers varied accordingly. Isn't that right?

**Boaz Keysar**: Exactly. So because we made it very clear that the speakers were not expressing their opinion, it wasn't their knowledge, they were just the messenger, they were just reciting what the experimenter wrote down, then if they had any stereotype about, you know, if somebody was a foreigner, it really shouldn't affect the judgement of the truth of the statement. But it did. When the speaker had a light accent they thought that the speaker was less credible, and also when the speaker had a heavy accent, that affected their perception of credibility.

And then in another study when we told them exactly what we were looking for and we explained to them that we were trying to see if they were going to be affected by the accent, we basically gave them a chance to undo it, to correct themselves...

**Maria Zijlstra**: Yes, to be aware of it themselves.

**Boaz Keysar**: Exactly. So what happens when you read about this, you know about it and you're trying to not be affected by it, and it turns out you can do it when the accent is light. So, in that study, there was no difference in the perception of credibility between whether you listened to somebody who was a native speaker without an accent or somebody with a light foreign accent. But the heavy accent, they couldn't correct for that, they still perceived the speaker as less credible. So I think in your native tongue it's not easy; it takes effort to process non-native speech.

**Maria Zijlstra**: I just want to make one final comment about that particular research which is that, you know, one reads so much about the advantages of having more than one language, that it's a very rare example of the downside, in a sense, of bilinguality, that one's accent might make you less credible.

**Boaz Keysar**: Yeah, it is an issue, not just because of the associated stereotypes but also this insidious effect, really, that it has, because I don't think this is conscious. The speaker doesn't realise the impact that it has, the listener doesn't realise how it affects the perception of credibility. You know, if you're seeking a job and you just sound a little bit less credible, that could be an issue. But I am sure that this disadvantage is outweighed by the advantages of being bilingual. There's no question about that.

And also it's not a black and white situation. When something is disfluent and you make these misattributions on the one hand, on the other hand you actually end up paying much closer attention to what the person says. So that could be an advantage; that because of the difficulty, you focus more and you remember better and you understand, sometimes, you understand the depth of what they say better because of that. We were focusing on just the narrow perception of credibility, but there are other impacts of this.

**Maria Zijlstra**: Well that perhaps leads into the other topic of research that I wanted to ask you about, where there is another influence of foreign language that is not on accent or credibility this time but on thinking and decision-making related to risk aversion, which is a kind of an inhibition caused by the fear of loss, right?

**Boaz Keysar**: Right. So this is not how you judge somebody else who is using a foreign language, but this is when you yourself are using a language that is not your native tongue. We discovered that it does affect the way that you make decisions in general.

**Maria Zijlstra**: If I may ask you just to very quickly outline that research, because I must compliment you and your colleague researchers on the artfulness of your procedures in your experiments, in your research. I loved it. In this one you had people making bets. You gave them some money and you make some nice comments too about how really they had nothing to lose because it wasn't even their own money that they were using, you'd given it to them. But still you could tell a whole lot from their behaviour.

**Boaz Keysar**: Yes. So we gave people $15, and we told them that they should take one dollar and make a decision. They [could] either put it in their pocket and take it home, or they can bet it. And if they decide to bet it then we flip a coin and either they lose a dollar or they get an extra dollar and a half, and they would do that 15 times. So really each of these bets, the gain is larger than the potential loss, and if you do it for 15 times it is likely that you're going to make money, not lose money.

**Maria Zijlstra**: Yes, because it's heads or tails, they just win depending on heads or tails, win or lose.

**Boaz Keysar**: Exactly. So what happened is, we looked at their willingness to take the bet, and people are concerned about it because they're afraid of loss—so that's what we call loss aversion—and because they are afraid of the loss they forego this attractive opportunity to actually make money. So we had them do it either in their native tongue, which was English, or Spanish, which is a foreign language to them. And it turns out that in English people were about 51% willing to take the bets, so about half the bets. But in Spanish they were, more than 70% of the bets they were willing to take. So they were much more willing to take the attractive bets; they were much less concerned about the potential loss. They were less motivated by fear, in a way, more by hope.

**Maria Zijlstra**: And more sensibly, in a sense, too.

**Boaz Keysar**: Yes, it does make sense to do, exactly, financially it makes sense to do that. So that is a very strong phenomenon, loss aversion is well documented. And we discovered really that in a foreign language you're less impacted by it, and that could be beneficial in the long run. So the basic idea is that when you're using a foreign language it provides a certain distance from your emotions, a psychological distance, and it puts you more in a deliberative mode. So you end up being less impulsive, you react less emotionally and you make the decision more systematically, more normatively. A lot of the biases that we know about when people make decisions, a lot of these biases result from an emotional reaction, and because of the distance that foreign language provides from the emotional system, we see that people are reacting and making decisions less emotionally and as a result less biased.

**Maria Zijlstra**: Can I run something past you, because it occurs to me then that if we make snap decisions based on emotions—I'm perhaps exaggerating a little bit, but if I may put it in that way—in our native tongues, in a language that we're used to thinking in, is that a kind of a processing fluency effect then too, that we just kind of do that really quickly, because we're used to it, it's easy?

**Boaz Keysar**: I think that's part of the mechanism, that in your native tongue it's very much a case of fluency, and when you're using a foreign language it is a kind of less fluent, the situation is less fluent, and that moves you to a more deliberative system, yes, exactly. There are several reasons for why we find our effects, and that's one of them.

**Maria Zijlstra**: You've got to think more.

**Boaz Keysar**: Um, I think that you basically end up thinking a little bit more slower and more deliberatively, yes. You don't have to think more, you just...

**Maria Zijlstra**: Think differently?

**Boaz Keysar**: You think differently, exactly. It's almost like you're slightly a different person because you are less connected to all sorts of systems that you have, like the emotional system. We know in general that a foreign language is in general not anchored in emotions like a native tongue, so people react very differently to childhood reprimands in their native tongue and in foreign language. In their native tongue it causes a strong arousal reaction, but not in a foreign language.

**Maria Zijlstra**: Right.

I know that that's true! Boaz Keysar is a professor of psychology at the University of Chicago in the United States, some of whose fascinating research on foreign language effects can be got at via his webpage.