The Effect of a Foreign Accent in Hiring Discrimination

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The extensive literature on labor market discrimination has demonstrated that employers might discriminate against workers based on their demographic characteristics, such as their race, ethnicity and country of origin (e.g., Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004; Oreopoulos, 2011; Hedegaard & Tyran, 2018; Bellemare *et al.*, 2023). A channel through which a worker's demographic characteristic is revealed is speech patterns. Previous research on non-native accent affecting how people are evaluated (e.g., in terms of trustworthiness, Munro *et al.*, 2006; Burns & Keswell, 2015; Caballero & Pell, 2020; Spence *et al.*, 2024) makes it important in an ever globalized world to study the extent to which immigrants might be perceived with biases in the labor market if their speech does not conform with that of natives, despite being highly proficient.

In this paper, we study whether otherwise comparable workers might perceive biases due to having a non-North American English accent. We implement a hiring lab experiment in which evaluators (hereafter employers) are randomly assigned to evaluate workers' performance on one of three skills tests: mathematics skills, verbal skills, and knowledge of social norms. Employers are also randomized to an information treatment that reveals the worker's accent ("Accent Revealed") or not ("Accent Blind").

Within their treatment group, we first elicit employers' beliefs regarding randomly assigned workers' productivity based on their resumes and accent characteristics. We find that employers assess that accented workers perform worse than non-accented workers on all three skills tests. This foreign accent gap persists even after employers receive a signal of the worker's performance in the test. Second, we explore whether employers offer differential compensation to workers with a foreign accent and find that a worker's foreign accent does not affect employers' willingness to pay. Thus, it suggests that even when employers' beliefs over performance might be inaccurate due to the presence of a foreign accent when making an offer that affects the worker's payoff, they might be willing to close the gap at a cost to themselves. Finally, we explore a novel channel through which beliefs about worker

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bargaining power may create wage differentials and find no differences in beliefs regarding worker willingness to accept.

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first paper to explore the role of *foreign accent* on labor market discrimination. While the existing literature addresses other demographic characteristics including immigration status (e.g., Oreopoulos, 2011), it has not included accent as a relevant source of variation. Our empirical strategy allows us to explore the role of accent while holding other language characteristics constant via our experiment design as well as utilizing recent improvements in Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools.

Keywords: Foreign accent discrimination, Labor market, Laboratory experiment

JEL Classification Codes: C91, D90, J01, J71.

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