

**HOW DO THREE IMMIGRANT WOMEN FROM FORMER YUGOSLAVIA  
PERCEIVE THE ROLE OF ACCENT IN INTELLEGIBILITY AND  
COMPREHENSIBILITY IN THE CANADIAN WORKPLACE?**

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## Abstract

Recent trends in language instruction have begun to shift away from achieving a native-like accent and towards a focus on intelligibility and comprehensibility. However, a subset of learners continues to feel discriminated against due to their perceived foreign accents. This may be a result of a listener bias towards familiar accents. Learners may feel the pressure to adhere to a native-like linguistic fluency that is nearly impossible for some to achieve. The following ethnographic feminist study examines the impact of perceived foreign accent on the professional career of adult immigrant women in a Canadian context. The study is *ethnographic* in that it centres around three adult immigrant women and their challenges in acquiring English as an additional language in Canada. It is *feminist* to the extent that it gives a voice to the women being studied, as well as taking a qualitative approach to exploring their stories. Interviews are used to create a narrative of the experiences that the participants have undergone since their arrival to Canada. The study addresses the question, *how do three immigrant women from former Yugoslavia perceive the role of accent in intelligibility and comprehensibility in the Canadian workplace?*

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## Chapter One: Introduction

Recent trends in language instruction have begun to shift away from achieving a native-like accent towards a focus on intelligibility and comprehensibility. Pinget (2014) states, “we need more insight into the question whether accentedness is an interfering factor that plays a role when a native speaker rates [second language] fluency, and vice versa” (p. 354). This decreasing emphasis on native-like accent attainment opens opportunities for language learners to focus on the development of other linguistic competencies, such as vocabulary acquisition or pronunciation, in order to communicate effectively. In this way, effective pronunciation is not linked exclusively to accent and may therefore be a more realistic goal for adult language learners. Having said this, Levin et al. (2014) challenge the notion that “adult learners generally struggle with target-language pronunciation” (p. 225) and propose that accent modification is possible, as “a growing body of scholarship casts doubt on the long-held belief that a strict critical period exists for L2 phonology” (Levin et al., 2014, p. 225). With the availability of accent reduction software, one must then wonder if learners are feeling added pressure to adhere to a native-like linguistic fluency that is nearly impossible for some to achieve. Within this contested context, that is, whether to refocus away from native-like accent or to take up new possibilities for accent modification, adult language learners continue to feel discriminated against due to their perceived foreign accents, specifically in regards to immigrant women in the professional sphere. This study thus asks the question, *how do three immigrant women from former Yugoslavia perceive the role of accent in intelligibility and comprehensibility in the Canadian workplace?*



## Statement of Interest

Coming from an immigrant family, my parents spoke of the discrimination they felt when they arrived in Canada in their thirties, even though they are not visible minorities. These sentiments were echoed by all of my relatives and family friends, who arrived to Canada during their adult years. My family left former Yugoslavia in 1992 at the outbreak of the civil war, migrating to Germany as refugees. When we arrived to Canada in 1995, my parents were made aware that their native Serbo-Croatian language and university degrees from the University of Sarajevo (located in present-day Bosnia and Herzegovina) were of little value in Toronto. They began to balance English as a Second Language classes while finding employment and raising their family. Their inability to express themselves coherently in English served as an obstacle to obtaining employment they were academically qualified for. Over the years, their grammatical and linguistic understanding of English increased, yet they became discouraged by the fact that they would never achieve a native-like accent. They often discussed the discrimination they felt at the workplace from their co-workers and superiors, and attributed this discrimination to the fact that they spoke with an accent. They felt that this perceived foreign accent represented an unfamiliar culture to the native English language listeners and this prevented them from fully assimilating into Canadian culture.

Even though I also arrived as a first generation Canadian, I have not felt the same level of discrimination as my older relatives. This may be due in part to having been formally schooled in Ontario and achieving a native-accent<sup>1</sup> at a very young age. I always felt that I was able to blend into Canadian society and often encountered surprised listeners when I shared my story of being

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<sup>1</sup> Notwithstanding variation in the English used by native speakers in the Greater Toronto Area, in my study *native-accent* refers broadly to the Canadian English pronunciation documented in Chambers (1989) and Thomas (1991).

born in former Yugoslavia and arriving to Canada at age 5. I feel that a native-accent advantage has helped me attain a career in education and the confidence to return to a post-secondary institution in order to pursue a Masters of Education. Additionally, I speculate that being of a white, European background has also provided me with privilege in assimilating into Canadian society, due to the fact that I am not a visible minority. My experience is in direct contrast to what my parents and their siblings experienced having arrived in Canada as adult immigrants.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The metropolitan areas of Canada, such as Greater Toronto Area (GTA), are becoming increasingly multicultural, and a rise in adult English Language Learners (ELLs) requires the re-evaluation of any hidden discriminatory practices that may be hindering the progress these individuals are making in regards to employment opportunities. The family members I spoke to stress that individuals who speak English with foreign accents face discrimination if they hold an unfamiliar foreign accent in the workplace. This becomes increasingly complex when the listener is unaware of potential bias towards certain accents over others. My interest is in revealing this bias and working towards cultivating an inclusive society in Canada. I hope to achieve this by giving a voice to non-visible minorities who speak English with foreign accents.

This study will offer insights into whether or not native speakers in Canada have progressed towards accepting perceived foreign accented English speakers as comprehensible and/or intelligible. Even if English language learners seek to abandon the expectation of achieving a native-like accent, there remain several obstacles to their communication with native speakers, such as the decreased likelihood of risk-taking when speaking or the avoidance of oral communication, as outlined by the research participants. This may lead to further obstacles in the

workplace and an inability to attain a position that an accented speaker is qualified for due, once again, to an inability to speak with a native-accent.

### **Purpose of The Study**

I developed my inquiry while discussing the inhibiting factors of accent on employability in North America with my immediate and extended family members who have experienced hardship when arriving in Canada. The research I encountered through my classes at York University outlines a shift from teaching pronunciation through a native-like model to teaching intelligibility and comprehension strategies. The goal of language learning has shifted away from achieving a native-like accent to achieving intelligibility and comprehensibility, yet learners continue to feel discriminated against if their accent is not native nor a familiar one to listeners. There may be a listener bias which brings the intelligibility or comprehensibility of the speaker into question.

By conducting a thorough review of the literature, I uncovered a need for further research on the impact of accent on speaker intelligibility and comprehension in regards to non-visible female immigrant minorities in a Canadian context. I uncovered a listener bias in favour of certain accents over others, depending on how foreign the accent is perceived to be by the listener. I considered the following questions in my review of accent and perceived language proficiency: which factors influence the development of an accent; what is fluency; what is the goal of language learning; which version of English should be taught in North America; and what is the societal effect of having a foreign accent?

## Research Question

If current research dictates a shift towards a comprehensibility model, we need to address the existing discrimination felt by learners with perceived foreign accents. I hope to explore what effect listener bias or schemas have on the perceived intelligibility of the speaker. Additionally, I will narrow my study in order to focus on the experiences of adult immigrant women in the workplace in order to conduct an ethnographic feminist study of the impact of accent on professional career. My central question is as follows: *what role does accent play in intelligibility and comprehensibility of adult immigrant women in the workplace?* In addressing this question, additional questions will also be posed. These questions are as follows:

- (1) Does accent serve as a potential obstacle for women in the professional sphere?
- (2) What is the role of listener bias in regards to perceptions of intelligibility and comprehensibility?

## **Chapter Two: Theoretical Framework and Literature Review**

### **What is an Accent?**

I took many definitions into consideration when cultivating an understanding of what an accent is. According to Derwing and Munro (2005), the concept of the foreign accent “is a complex aspect of language that affects speakers and listeners in both perception and production and, consequently, in social interaction” (p. 379). Levy and Crowley (2012) describe an accent as “pronunciation that is not the result of pathology and is perceived to be different from the listener’s, whether the [language] was learned as a first, second or other language” (p. 48). It is important to note that every speaker has an accent, and the degree of one’s accent is determined by the listener’s perspective and perception of a way of speaking being different from his or her own. This paper focuses on accents deemed to be foreign by native North American speakers of English.

### **Why do speakers have accents?**

Moyer (2007) argues that there is a significant impact from age, the length of immersion in the target language and attitude on the prevalence of an accent” (p. 502). The degree to which a speaker has an accent in a target language will vary from individual to individual, and can be based on a variety of factors, as listed above. Moyer (2007) emphasizes that “a combination of experience and a positive orientation appears to be particularly important for attaining greater authenticity in accent” (p. 502). The degree of accentedness also depends on how the speaker is perceived by the listener. “The unique mode of sound production that is influenced by a speaker’s dialect of native language” may “elicit positive or negative reactions in the listener” (Carlson & McHenry, 2011, p. 700). If a listener is unfamiliar with the native language of the

English language learner, then the accent may be perceived as being foreign, whereas a familiar native language may not be perceived to be foreign to the same degree. As mentioned above, several factors influence the development of an accent. An accent carries and is influenced by “a person’s geographical origin, native language, or social status” and may be thought of as the “phonological individuality of spoken language” (Carlson & McHenry, 2011, p. 702).

Researchers have begun to increasingly “point to learners’ responses to complex social pressures, and their relationships with target-language speakers, as among the most important factors in understanding how and why L2 speakers come to sound as they do” (Levin et al., 2014, p. 225). The relationship between contact with speakers of the target language and living in the target language is an example of how learners may work towards this goal. Language contact and experience play an integral role, yet “socio-psychological factors have been shown to exert significant influence on accent, including concern for pronunciation accuracy, sense of identity, motivation to learn the target language and attitudes toward the target language culture, among others” (Moyer, 2007, p. 504). Several of the above factors may be understood as intrinsic motivators for language learning that can be extended to extrinsic workplace motivators. Few researchers have focused on “socio-psychological factors as influential for attainment in L2 phonology” even though “these questions bear closer scrutiny given that accent matters on both the collective and the individual levels; it affects not just communicative fluency but contributes to judgments of social belonging and identity as well” (p. 505). If a speaker is deemed to speak with a foreign accent by the native listener, this may create a disconnect with the target language culture, causing the learner to feel like an outsider in the new environment. This is due to the fact that “listeners’ judgments of L2 speech may be mediated by non-linguistic factors, such as

listeners' attitudes toward a given non-native speaking community, including stereotyped expectations about specific speech patterns that may not even be present in the speech signal" (Pinget, 2014, p. 905-906). Being perceived as having a foreign accent may extend to being perceived as being an outsider to the target language culture. These factors may work together to exclude adult immigrants from Canadian society.

### **Which factors contribute to the development of a foreign accent?**

Research demonstrates that a native-like accent correlates with long-term residence in the target-language country. Yet, problems arise when using "simplistic measures of language contact [such as the length of residence, as they] tell us nothing about the quality of that experience from the point of view of input and interaction" (Moyer, 2007, p. 504). Moyer (2007) also emphasizes that moving to a new linguistic environment in adulthood does not always ensure that the speaker will transition to L2 dominance (p. 504). The learner may choose to surround him or herself with other learners from their native culture, thus reducing their exposure to the target language or culture. When natural exposure to the target language is scarce, learners may choose to use technology in order to "be provided with exposure and practice/interaction opportunities in the target language through specifically designed software programs" (Seferoglu, 2005, p. 314). It is important to note that "whilst practicing individual sounds and supra-segmental features in structured drills through pronunciation software may be helpful, pronunciation taught in isolation may not carry over to improved pronunciation in actual communication" (p. 314). Using technology to learn a language may be one element in the learning process, but it does little to account for the target culture or the element of spontaneous human interaction that can be experienced by practicing in a real-life context. Seferoglu (2005)

suggests that communicative activities in addition to structured drills are required to help learners successfully acquire a target language (p. 314).

### **What is fluency?**

Pinget et al. (2014) emphasize that “fluency and perceived foreign accent can be judged as separate constructs” (p. 349). Even though fluency and accent are understood as two aspects of L2 production, they are oftentimes interchangeably “assessed in language testing practices, and influence the extent to which an L2 speaker is considered to be proficient” (Pinget, 2014, p. 350). Additionally, they are “the primary features perceived by ordinary native interlocutors, regardless of the speaker’s actual proficiency” (p. 350). A native listener may or may not perceive a speaker to be fluent depending on how foreign the accent is to the listener; therefore, the perception of foreign-ness may be entirely subjective. Pinget (2014) also points out that although these terms (fluency and accent) “are regularly used to describe and assess someone’s speech production in the L2, there seems to be no explicit consensus concerning what exactly is understood by these concepts” (p. 350). The research distinguishes between two senses of fluency: “in the so-called broad sense, fluency refers to . . . overall language performance . . . in contrast, fluency in its narrow sense is considered as one component of oral proficiency, as opposed to other components, such as grammatical knowledge or vocabulary size” (p. 350). Yet, according to a study by Freed (1995), “accentedness is one of the most important factors by which raters claimed to be influenced when reporting on their experiences during fluency rating tasks” (p. 353-354). Freed (1995) outlines the underlying theme of this proposed study: if fluency is determined in part by how accented the speech is, then discrimination against perceived foreign accent may exist.



## **What is the Goal of Language Learning?**

In the field of second language acquisition, the goal of producing native-like speech has refocused to producing intelligible speech. That is to say, the goal has shifted from “accent modification” and “accent reduction” towards “intelligibility enhancement” (Levy & Crowley, 2012, p. 48). Due to the fact that only a few exceptional adult learners appear to master native-like speech in second language learning, this is not a realistic expectation of all language learners (Moyer, 2007, p. 503). In language learning situations, oftentimes the learners are acquiring a language in a classroom setting, without natural exposure to the target language. This increases the difficulty of attaining a native-like accent due to a lack of exposure to native speakers or the target language culture (Seferoglu, 2005, p. 303). Therefore, a language learner is almost certain to “exhibit some degree of foreign accent... that is, the pronunciation of his L2 shows deviations from native norms” (Pinget, et al., 2014, p. 352). The question remains whether or not adult language learners feel discriminated against in the workplace for this reason.

Although research suggests that native-like mastery is challenging for learners, “learning target language pronunciation... is an indispensable part of mastering a foreign or second language” (Seferoglu, 2005, p. 303). The focus is moving away from accent, towards pronunciation and the development of comprehensibility and intelligibility. It follows that there exists a tension between two contradictory principles in language learning: the “nativeness principle [outlines] the goal of L2 learning is to help speakers acquire a native-like accent and eradicate traces of their native language” (Trofimovich & Isaacs, 2012, p. 905) whereas the “intelligibility principle emphasizes that L2 speakers should essentially strive to be understandable to their interlocutors, while acknowledging that a non-native accent does not

necessarily preclude successful communication” (Trofimovich & Isaacs, 2012, p. 905).

Trofimovich and Isaacs (2012) emphasize that “intelligibility and comprehensibility have been referred to as the rightful goals of L2 teaching and, by implication, of L2 assessment” (p. 906).

These goals are more attainable by adult language learners, in comparison to the goal of achieving a native accent. As early as 1949, Abercrombie argued that most “language learners need no more than a comfortably intelligible pronunciation” (as quoted in Munro & Derwing, 1995, p. 74). That is to say, the ultimate goal of language instruction should be to “make sure that [English language] students can always be understood to say what they want to say. They will need good pronunciation for this, though they may not need to have perfect accents”

(Seferoglu, 2005, p. 305). These recent trends in language instruction have been focusing on realistic and concrete goals for adult learners, which may be achieved through exposure to native speakers and the target culture.

### **What are intelligibility and comprehensibility?**

Intelligibility may be broadly defined as “the extent to which a speaker’s message is actually understood by a listener, but there is no universally accepted way of assessing it” (Munro & Derwing, 1995, p. 76), nor is there a standard for measuring intelligibility in research. According to Munro and Derwing (1995), researchers have measured intelligibility by counting the total number of words listeners transcribed correctly, counting the percentage of key words recognized, counting entire accurate phrases, or counting accurate paraphrasing (p. 76), among other things. Additionally, understandings of intelligibility have been broadened to include “the listener’s apprehension of the intended message, basic word and utterance recognition, and even the social acceptability of an utterance” (Moyer, 2007, p.503). Overall, intelligibility relies

heavily on how much of the message the listener understands.

Carlson and McHenry (2011) explain that intelligibility needs to be “an objective measure of the degree to which an utterance was understood” (p. 72). By contrast, comprehensibility “is based on a native speaker’s perception of listener burden . . . [or] how simple or challenging it is for the listener to comprehend the speaker’s message” (Carlson & McHenry, 2011, p. 72). The researchers outline *listener burden* as perceived by the listener to be extra work in order to comprehend the speaker. “Listener burden may increase processing time, which would lead the listener to view the speakers as being less comprehensible, even though the speaker may be intelligible” (Moyer, 2007, p. 502). Researchers are beginning to ask whether or not a perceived foreign accent matters if the message is understood.

### **Which version of English should be taught in North America?**

If acquiring a native-like accent is no longer a priority in language learning, then one must wonder which version of English should be taught to learners, and whether or not this matters. Jenkins (2005) “advocates an international version of English, a so-called lingua franca core, as a more realistic model for pronunciation teaching” (Scales, et al., 2006, p. 716). Due to the fact that the study of pronunciation has been “marginalized within the field of applied linguistics . . . teachers are often left to rely on their own intuitions with little direction” (Derwing, 2005, p. 379). There are a multitude of varieties of English around the world which can serve as instructional models for pronunciation, deriving from England, Scotland, Ireland, The United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, just to name a few. Learners are additionally encouraged to learn colloquialisms in each culture. According to Bailey (1978), “the effects of employing bookish speech in English can be socially unacceptable, as in most

languages. But ‘bookishness’ comes closer to what foreigners are often taught as ‘correct’ English than it does to what is found true of some other languages” (p. 230). Although the above variations in the English language exist, the fact that native listeners may be more lenient in their dismissing of errors in spoken English does not imply that they are not affected by a perceived foreign accent. And if this is the case, is there a listener preference for an accent from one of the above countries, in contrast to an accent stemming from an unfamiliar language or culture?

### **What is the Societal Effect of Having a Perceived Foreign Accent?**

Intelligibility of accented speech depends on “the languages paired, degree of accent, and characteristics of the stimuli and listeners” (Levy & Crowley, 2012, p. 48). Studies by Bradlow and Bent indicate that “more familiar accents and milder accents as perceived by listeners are often the most intelligible” (p. 48). If the speaker is from a culture that is familiar to the listener or another Anglophone culture, the listener may perceive the accent to be less foreign and the speaker to be more intelligible. This indicates that there may be varying degrees of perceived foreignness in accents as well as a listener bias. Judgments of accent are therefore partially subjective, “as listener familiarity with the L2 user’s mother tongue could influence perceptions of intelligibility, as could the listener’s own ideas about what (or more aptly, who) represents a legitimate ‘standard’ for English pronunciation” (Moyer, 2007, p. 503). Not only is intelligibility affected by listener bias but this extends to how honest the speaker is perceived to be. “Native listeners tend to perceive statements as being less truthful when spoken by accented L2 speakers. [Trofimovich and Isaacs (2012)] attributed this finding to listeners’ reduced processing fluency... [since] easier to process information is perceived as more truthful, familiar, pleasant, or more distinct than information that is harder to process (Trofimovich & Isaacs, 2012, p. 906-

907). Not only is intelligibility put into question by listener bias, but credibility and trustworthiness are also compromised. This could be problematic in the professional sphere when interviewing for a position or working with native speakers.

The age of the listener is an additional determiner of the intelligibility of the speaker. Burda, Scherz, Hageman, and Edwards (2003) found that “older listeners performed significantly less accurately than younger listeners in understanding accented speech. Furthermore, elderly adults perform more accurately on familiar accents and on longer utterances than on shorter utterances spoken with unfamiliar accents, probably benefiting from context to understand accented speech” (Levy & Crowley, 2012, p. 48). They continue that any obstruction in overall noise will affect the listener’s ability to comprehend the message. Background noise has been found to increase the difficulty of comprehending unfamiliar accents (Levy & Crowley, 2012, p. 48). Even though the speaker cannot alter these conditions, Munro & Derwing (1995) report a study in which “most listeners showed significant correlations between accentedness and errors, fewer listeners showed correlations between accentedness and perceived comprehensibility, and fewer still showed a relationship between accentedness and intelligibility” (Munro & Derwing, 1995, p. 74). In this case, once again, intelligibility is linked to how much of the message the listener understands, whereas comprehensibility is connected to how simple or challenging it is for the listener to comprehend the speaker’s message. As noted above, there are several factors which may disadvantage a language learner which are out of their realm of control.

One element of language learning may be finding one’s place in the culture of the target language, in order to foster a sense of belonging and acceptance amongst native speakers. According to Munro and Derwing (1995), the popularity of accent reduction programs may hint

at a general bias against foreign accented speech. “Numerous studies have shown that native-speaker listeners tend to downgrade non-native speakers simply because of foreign accent” (Munro & Derwing, 1995, p. 74). Yet it is important to note that “there is as yet no indication that reduction of accent necessarily entails increased intelligibility. The effects of non-native-like pronunciations on intelligibility are far from clear” (Munro & Derwing, 1995, p. 75). Levy and Crowley (2012) indicate that language instruction is encouraging a shift to intelligibility and comprehensibility, yet it remains that language learners may experience pressure to achieve a native accent. Due to the fact that this is not a possible goal for all adult learners, they may feel a sense of discouragement or discrimination through their learning process.

Levin et al. (2014) state that “accent-related discrimination leads L2 speakers to devalue their own speech” (p. 225). This may result in less participation in the workplace if the learner must interact with native speakers orally. This, in turn, may hinder advancement in the workplace. Kang and Rubin (as cited in Levin et al., 2014) emphasize that “accents are not easily separated from structures of power and domination in society, and ... perceptions of speakers’ voices can have real and long-lasting consequences for learners” (p. 226). The power dynamics may allow for native speakers to progress to higher level positions if accented speakers feel they are being discriminated against, and thus do not take career advancement steps. Harrison (as cited in Levin et al., 2014) outlines how “one’s pronunciation is a form of cultural capital, and much more than a simple marker of identity. She describes the damaging effects of L2-accent discrimination in society – when, for instance, L2 speakers forego financially advantageous opportunities because of their worries about attitudes to non-native speech” (p. 226). Even though language instruction is less focused on attaining a native-like accent, accented individuals

continue to feel discriminated against by native speakers, regardless of their overall intelligibility. This is problematic in a workplace that involves oral communication between native and accented speakers.

### **What is the effect of having an accent on employability?**

English language learners' goals are varied and may be mainly instrumental (Scales, 2006, p. 717), such as acquiring employment in the target language. If intelligibility and comprehension are the goals of language instruction, then an intelligible, accented speaker should not feel discriminated against in the workplace. This notion was put to the test in a study of sixty human resource specialists judging three female applicants for a position (Carlson & McHenry, 2011). The applicants represented speakers of Spanish-influenced English, Asian-influenced English, and African American Vernacular English. "When the speaker's perceived accent or dialect was minimal, perceived ethnicity did not affect employability. However, all speakers with maximally perceived accents or dialects were given a lower employability rating. Thus, speakers with a maximally perceived accent or dialect should consider accent or dialectal modification if their comprehensibility or prospective employability is compromised" (p. 70). In general, the maximally perceived accents and dialects received negative ratings in the study, signaling discriminatory hiring practices. The researchers state,

"a speaker of Asian-influenced English might be perceived as competitive because of the occupational stereotypes associated with Asian Americans excelling in technical and scientific professions . . . Speakers with a British accent tend to be viewed as refined, on the basis of impressions people have of the British way of life . . . Speakers whose accents or dialects matched those that listeners perceived to be of the majority group were

generally rated higher on characteristics related to aptitude, intelligence, and socioeconomic or social status, whereas speakers whose accents were perceived to be not of the majority group were rated lower on these same characteristics . . . applicants with ‘foreign’ accents (i.e., Italian, Greek, Portuguese, West African, and Slovak) were rated most suitable for lower status jobs among Canadian-English speaking judges” (p. 71).

The above attitudes are discriminatory and may hinder the career goals of individuals with accented speech, regardless of their level of intelligibility or comprehensibility.

Trofimovich & Isaacs (2012) outline an article in *The New York Times* which describes an elementary school teacher in Arizona (an immigrant from northern Mexico) who was struggling to keep her job because her accent was perceived as prohibiting her from being able to perform her role appropriately. “Like this teacher, many other people in North America may have also been confronted by their employers, inspected by ‘accent police’ for the clarity of articulation, forced to take university acting classes, or referred to speech pathologists or accent reduction specialists” (Trofimovich & Isaacs, 2012, p. 905). Such programs suggest that an accent is a negative aspect of speech that should be “subject to treatment, intervention, or even eradication in much the same way as a language pathology” (Munro & Derwing, 1995, p.74). Although the above research outlines discriminatory practices in The United States, the literature remains minimal in terms of whether or not such practices are taking place in a Canadian context. It becomes integral to outline if there is any negative or discriminatory role of a perceived foreign accent in intelligibility and comprehensibility of adult immigrants in the Canadian workplace.



## **Chapter Three: Research Methodology**

### **Methods**

This study is an ethnographic feminist study, examining the experiences of three adult immigrant women in the Canadian workplace. Preliminary data was collected through a written interview, which allowed participants time to reflect on their responses. According to Maynard (1994), “feminists have largely used interviewing in their work” (p. 93), which allows for a qualitative approach to be taken. The interviews are used to create a narrative of the experiences the participants have undergone since their arrival in Canada. Pinnegar and Daynes (2006) suggest that the use of narrative has evolved due to several factors: “the relationship between the researcher and the researched, the move away from numbers towards words, the move from the generic to the specific, and the acceptance of alternate ways of knowing” (Lichtman, 2013, p. 95). Once the answers were submitted and reviewed, the participants were asked to conduct an oral follow-up interview for additional information and clarification. The interview questions were sent to the participants in English, and they responded in English or by code-switching in their native language (Serbo-Croatian). The purpose of these written and oral interviews was to explore possible examples of any discrimination the participants feel as adult female English language learners in a Canadian professional context. Their responses were used to explore whether accent plays a role in intelligibility and comprehensibility of adult immigrant women in the workplace. The study takes a feminist approach with its emphasis on “listening to, recording and understanding women’s own descriptions and accounts” (Maynard, 1994, p. 90).

### **Participant Selection**

As this is an ethnographic feminist study, the participants are three women related to me. The participants are sisters who currently live in or have lived in three metropolitan cities across

Canada (Toronto, Ottawa, Charlottetown, and Fredericton). They were all raised in the same household in former Yugoslavia, and arrived in Canada as adults. They share experiences relating to learning English as an additional language, as well as establishing a professional career in their respective Canadian cities. The participants self-identify as *accented speakers*, or speakers of English whose accent differs from an accent native to Canada or the metropolitan region in which they are living and working. I will be using a feminist perspective as it differs from other research in regards to the “questions we have asked, the way we locate ourselves within our questions, and the purpose of our work” (Maynard, 1994, p. 92). I am interested in how the experiences of the three women relate to each other, and whether there are common themes in their narratives. Although I also arrived to Canada as a first generation immigrant, I learned English as a child through the public school system, and I do not self-identify as having a foreign accent. It follows that they may have experienced obstacles in the workplace in relation to their accents that I have not experienced, due to the fact that I attained a native accent at an early age. I would like to expose any discriminatory practices that they have faced, which native speakers, such as myself, are not aware of.

### **Participants**

**Ana** is a 56-year-old Assistant Branch Manager at a Canadian bank, living in Newmarket, Ontario. She arrived in Canada in 1994 with her husband and daughter. She has lived in Brampton, Scarborough and Richmond Hill, Ontario, previously working as a Cash Supervisor and Postal Clerk at Shoppers Drug Mart. Prior to arriving to Canada, she completed an undergraduate degree in Economics at the University of Sarajevo and worked as a Manager of the Finance and Economic Department in a mining industry company.

**Maria** is a 51-year-old Civil Engineer and Partner at an Engineering firm, living in Ottawa, Ontario. She arrived in Canada in 1997 with her husband. She previously lived in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island for 8 years, working as a CAD Draftsperson and Civil Engineer. Prior to arriving to Canada, she completed an undergraduate degree in Engineering at the University of Sarajevo.

**Sofia** is a 45-year-old Business Architect (previously an Intelligence Analyst), living in Ottawa, Ontario. She arrived in Canada in 1994 as an unmarried student. She previously lived in Fredericton, New Brunswick for 6 years, working a waitress, sales clerk, bank teller, and loans officer. Upon arriving to Canada, she completed an undergraduate degree in Business from the University of Prince Edward Island and a Master's degree in Business from the University of Ottawa.

**Table 1: Summary of Participant Information**

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Years in Canada</b>	<b>Current Profession (City of Residence)</b>	<b>Degrees (Institution Name)</b>	<b>Previous Profession(s)</b>	<b>Previous Cities of Residence in Canada</b>
Ana	56	23	Banker (Newmarket, Ontario)	Undergraduate degree in Economics (University of Sarajevo)	Cash Supervisor, Post Office Clerk, Manager of Finance and Economics	Brampton, Scarborough, Richmond Hill (Ontario)
Maria	51	20	Civil Engineer and Partner (Ottawa, Ontario)	Undergraduate degree in Engineering (University of Sarajevo)	CAD Draftsperson	Charlottetown (Prince Edward Island)

Sofia	45	23	Business Architect (Ottawa, Ontario)	Undergraduate degree in Business (University of PEI) and Master's of Business (University of Ottawa)	Waitress, Sales Clerk, Bank Teller, Loans Officer, Intelligence Analyst, Student	Fredericton (New Brunswick)
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### Data Gathering

The data gathered for this research study was initially collected through structured interviews, using pre-prepared questions (located in Appendix A). The analysis of the responses was followed by unstructured interviews taking place between November 2016 and March 2017.

**Structured Interviews.** The data is qualitative, in the form of interview questions administered via a written protocol. The interview questions are open-ended with room for additional comments. Maynard (1994) emphasizes the importance of conducting “an open-ended exploration of women’s’ experiences” (p.90), thus the questions administered allow for additional comments and further elaboration. During the written part of the interviews, the participants were given the opportunity to write their answers so that they could reflect and answer to the best of their ability. The interviews were modeled on Glesne (2011) and Savenye & Robinson (2005), as they were semi-structured and followed by a conversational element.

**Unstructured Interviews.** Once the semi-structured written results were received and analyzed for emerging themes, the participants were invited to take part in oral conversations, which were less structured, either in Serbo-Croatian or in English. This allowed for additional comments from the participants to further elaborate or enhance their responses. This element took the form of unstructured interviews.

## Data Analysis and Coding

The written and oral interviews were analyzed for indications of any discriminatory practices experienced by the participants in regards to learning English as a female adult immigrant in a Canadian context, and how this relates to their professional careers. This research study used a qualitative grounded theory approach. According to Glesne (2011), this methodological approach develops theory that is grounded in the data. The data was gathered in the form of an interview and then analyzed “for conceptual categories, [which link] the categories into a tentative theory, and then more data [was collected] to see how the theory fits” (Glesne, 2011, p. 21). I used theoretical sampling and coding in order to accomplish this. My study is small-scale; therefore, I was looking for depth in the three interviews. Cohen et al. (2011) state that sampling is the on-going collection of data until there is enough data to explain what is happening, whereas coding is the process of deconstructing and reconstructing the data. In order to analyze the data for this study, selective coding was used, which means that “a core code is identified, the relationship between that core code and other codes is made clear, and the coding scheme is compared with pre-existing theory” (Cohen et al., 2011). The relationship between the researcher and those being researched has moved away from an objective stance to one that involves an interpretive position (Lichtman, 2013, p. 95). I draw out themes from the experiences of the three women and relate them back to the literature in order to draw any new conclusions or support any pre-existing theories. *Becoming qualitative researchers*” (Glesne, 2011) served as an analytic reference point.

**Trustworthiness of the data.** In order to ensure accuracy and credibility of the data, “member checking” procedures were utilized (Glesne, 2011). The initial interview questions were sent to the participants by email. The participants responded to the questions using their

own words, and resubmitted them to the researcher by email. An unstructured conversational element followed, which allowed for further clarification of the initial written responses. At this point, the participants were able to elaborate further on their responses, and the researcher could seek additional clarification, if anything was unclear. For verification purposes, this oral conversation was transcribed and submitted to the participants via email, as an electronic copy. This final stage allowed participants to verify that their responses were transcribed and represented accurately. Their statements were unaltered and were used as direct quotations throughout the study.

## **Chapter Four: Findings**

The present study addressed the following core focus question: what role does accent play in intelligibility and comprehensibility of adult immigrant women in the workplace? The data analysis identified five major themes that provide an insight into the perspectives of accented adult immigrant women in Canada's professional sphere. These five themes are as follows: (1) accent as an obstacle, (2) influence of accent and gender in the workplace, (3) accent modification, (4) the role of listener bias and burden, and (5) the role of accent in identity. In the following sections, the above themes will be discussed in relation to the data through the use of direct quotes derived from the structured interviews. A connection will be made between the data and the relevant literature in the subsequent chapter.

### **Accent as an Obstacle**

All three participants view their accent as an obstacle in their professional life. Ana states: "sometimes I feel that if I was a native speaker I would be able to better express myself, that's my limitation." Although Maria felt that her English is at an acceptable linguistic level, she continues to struggle with the obstacles presented by having an accent: "I know my English is sufficiently functional professionally, but to succeed in professional life, one needs more than that." Sofia agrees by stating, "being a non-native English speaker requires me to think about the way I speak, the use of articles, nuances, idioms, etc. My vocabulary will always be limited, preventing me from becoming the effective communicator I could be." When in a professional context, Ana states that she "always question[s] how [she is] going to structure [her] sentences grammatically, [is she] going to be understood?" She continues by asking, "are people going to judge me? That takes away from what I want to say, it takes the focus away from what I'm trying

to explain. I'm trying to explain my idea, and my focus goes on how I'm going to explain it and sometimes I just give up."

The women express a hardship in relation to being a non-visible minority with a perceived foreign-accent, which lead all three women to encounter obstacles in regards to career advancement. "I belong to an audible minority that suffers from the same discrimination issues as the visible minorities, with an additional downside, that there are no rules to protect us from discrimination. The presence of an accent prompts immediate questions such as, 'where are you from?' This is no different from asking, for example, an Asian-looking person, 'where are you from?'" (Sofia). The women feel that this level of discrimination, towards non-visible minorities, is not addressed to the same extent that it is in regards to visible minorities.

### **Influence of Accent and Female Gender in the Workplace**

In addition to feeling accent discrimination at the workplace, specifically in a business and government environment, the participants struggled with gender discrimination. Ana states: when you are a woman who speaks with an accent, you're perceived as someone who needs this job and doesn't have much say. Any job that you get should be good enough, so you're not even asked something like 'do you want a few weekends off,' instead I always get the worst case scenario. Someone who speaks perfect English, or is a man, has a sense of entitlement, thinking they don't need to offer anything extra. They think that I should feel lucky to have a job and I should be grateful that they accepted me. With pay, they wonder why I would need a raise, so I feel that I am paid less than native speakers in the same role, women especially men.

Maria agrees by stating,



I was oblivious to that for some time; however, I got to learn that my male colleagues get it easier. I feel it is a man's world, at least in my profession... I was not trusted or respected as a female and an immigrant engineer. It is common and acceptable for a native language engineer as a technical person not to be very good in writing, but I am perceived as less intelligent if my writing and spelling skills are not very good.

**The role of accent towards career advancement.** The participants felt that their perceived foreign accent acted as an obstacle towards career advancement: “I work in a bilingual Federal government environment, and speaking English with an accent with no French language skills has made my career advancement difficult” (Sofia). Although all three women were academically qualified to be working in higher levels of the professional sphere, they lacked the linguistic confidence to pursue their professional goals. This may have also interfered with their comfort level in discussing raises with their superiors. They felt that their gender and accent served as an obstacle to their overall career satisfaction and advancement.

### **Accent Modification**

Although the participants agreed that it would not be possible to modify their accent, they expressed a desire to remove this obstacle from their speech. “I want my accent to blend more into how people speak here, and not be recognizably different when I say something. This is important because I wouldn't have this complex that when I speak they will judge me for my accent, and not try to understand what I want to say” (Ana). Maria outlined that her accent distanced her from her native-speaker colleagues: “I would love to be able to change my accent but I know that is the last thing I can change. With the accent as is, people know right away I am from away”.

**The role of English Language Classes.** Ana and Sofia began learning English through English-language classes when they arrived in Canada, and had similar experiences that led to them terminating their participation in the programs. Ana stated, “we did take a couple English as a Second Language courses, but I always left them if any jobs came along because I felt better earning money. They dump everyone in the same class, some people have to take the classes to get a pension, but people like us wanted to enter the workforce. My need was very different from theirs. There should be classes for people with different needs, going to school for fun or to gain the language for work reasons.” Sofia outlines that “immigrants rarely have the luxury of the time required to master the language” in an English language class. She states, “I took English language classes during my early years in Canada. It wasn’t for professional reasons, per se, but rather for learning the basics in order to get an entry-level job. I came to Canada when I was 22 and there was no time to focus on learning the language.” Although Maria did not take any formal English language classes, she agreed that “there is no time or money for language classes when you are starting up. I don’t even believe the language classes would help significantly in pronunciation and fluency, particularly not with the accent”.

### **The Role of Listener Bias and Burden**

The participants felt that their accents did create a burden on the native-listener, and this posed communicative problems for them. Ana states:

As soon as I say something that they need to make an effort to understand, they just disregard me. ‘She speaks with an accent; how can she know anything related to the profession?’ For example, when people in the same role have meetings and I say something, they respond by saying ‘yeah, ok, that’s fine’ but they go with a less great idea because it was given by someone else. Then a couple weeks later, a native speaker

gives the same idea as me and it is accepted with glory: ‘that’s a great idea! Let’s do it!’

This makes me feel badly discriminated, even my confidence gets really affected by that. Maria agrees by stating, “I am not a big talker, but speaking in English makes me very self-conscious, and even less talkative, and I find it a big disadvantage in the professional life.” Sofia also states that “sometimes I feel like people look at me with the expression of intense effort and impatience in trying to understand me when I speak. I find in most cases it is not warranted and is a prejudice in that if they hear an accent, they think I will not be able to express myself, or may not say anything of value.”

### **The Role of Accent in Identity**

When interacting with native speakers, all three participants felt a negative connection between their accent and their overall identity. Ana outlines the following: “my obstacle is that I’m really being judged as soon as I open my mouth. They think, ‘someone who speaks with an accent, what does she know?’ I feel that they put me down because I’m not able to express myself as if I was a native speaker, especially when they start asking ‘where is your accent from?’ or when they refer to me as ‘the woman with the heavy accent.’” Sofia agrees by stating: “it would be important to me to not be identified as an ‘English is my second language’ person.”

When asked about the impact of accent on their overall lives, Ana responded by saying, “accent does affect your complete life. People that I work with every day, they really don’t know how to say my name and they never want to learn it. How can you really appreciate what I have to say when you can’t say my name and you’d rather not say it . . . the native speaker will be praised because they don’t speak with an accent. It’s a big bias.” Maria agrees by stating that an accent “is something that people notice about you right away and whether they have a problem with it or not, there is always a possibility that they may have difficulty understanding you. I’m

finding that people need to learn to understand non-native English people speaking English. I wish I was not as self-conscious about that.”

## Chapter Five: Discussion and Conclusion

### Drawing on the Data to Address the Research Question

This qualitative study explores the perspectives of three adult female immigrant participants in regards to the role their accent plays in their professional life. This research study was guided by the following question: *what role does accent play in intelligibility and comprehensibility of adult immigrant women in the workplace?* In addressing this question, additional questions were also posed. These questions are as follows:

- (1) Does accent serve as a potential obstacle for women in the professional sphere?
- (2) What is the role of listener bias in regards to perceptions of intelligibility and comprehensibility?

In the following sections I draw on the data to address these questions.

**The role of accent as an obstacle in the workplace.** All three women expressed that their perceived foreign accent served as an obstacle towards their career advancement in Canada. Due to the discrimination they felt by native listeners, they were reluctant to take risks involving speaking English. This may have hindered their professional development or the attainment of a monetary raise. Levin et al. (2014) emphasize that “accent-related discrimination leads L2 speakers to devalue their own speech” (p. 225). This, in turn, may decrease their confidence in their ability to request additional compensation in the workplace, if it relies on engaging in oral conversation. Regardless of the fact that they were academically qualified for higher levels of employment and held the necessary knowledge and skills to advance further, their accent continued to serve as an obstacle. If the women were able to attain a higher level of employment, they felt that their competence was judged or their input was rejected by their native speaking colleagues.

**The role of gender as an obstacle in the workplace.** In addition to the challenge of speaking with a foreign accent, the women also felt that their gender played a debilitating role in their workplace. They expressed frustration in relation to not being held to the same status as their male counterparts, or being made to feel that they should be grateful for the positions they had already attained, without asking for more. The combination of being female and accented likely prevented them from taking risks in their career development, which kept them in positions of inferiority. According to Cundiff and Vescio (2016), “evaluators tend to hold women to higher standards than men and thus underestimate women’s potential and overestimate men’s potential” (p. 134). The women in the study expressed frustration at being treated differently than their male counterparts, and believed their competence was heavily scrutinized due in part to their accented speech. Cundiff and Vescio (2016) also suggest that “stereotypes may hinder people’s recognition that discrimination is a potential cause of women’s underrepresentation in traditionally male fields. Failing to acknowledge gender discrimination when it does exist can impede efforts designed to mitigate discrimination” (p. 134). The women in the present study face a dual discrimination in regards to their gender and accent, which keeps them in lower-level positions or prevents them from seeking a monetary raise.

**The role of listener bias.** All three participants felt that their accented speech was a burden on native listeners. This may be due to the fact that their accent is perceived to be unfamiliar and it requires additional processing time, on the part of the listener, to comprehend their message. In this context, the speaker may be perceived as being less intelligible or competent. Moyer (2007) states that “listener familiarity with the L2 user’s mother tongue could influence perceptions of intelligibility, as could the listener’s own ideas about what (or more aptly, who) represents a legitimate ‘standard’ for English pronunciation” (p. 503). Regardless of

the actual competence of the speaker, the additional element of burden on the listener serves as an obstacle in regards to the speakers' comprehensibility. This may interfere with their ability to initially attain employment through the obstacle of having to complete an oral job interview, or retain their present role if they are perceived to be less efficient than a native speaker. An employer may choose a candidate who expresses themselves orally with ease in a role that relies heavily on communication with other colleagues or with customers.

**The role of accent in identity formation.** Overall, the women felt a negative connection to their accents. Their foreign accent affected their confidence levels when speaking to native speakers and inhibited their desire and willingness to take risks. Regardless of their working knowledge and understanding of other linguistic components of the English language (such as sentence structure or grammar), their accent continued to serve as an obstacle to being understood. On this point, Jenks (2013) outlines two forms of identity construction: “‘practicing’ is a membership categorization device that is generally reserved for interactants that are actively learning a language; in contrast, competent speakers who are not learning a language – including monolingual speakers – do not generally claim to be ‘practicing’ the language” (173). The three women self-identify as the former, and emphasize that they felt trapped in this state. This inhibited their ability to fully feel a sense of belonging in Canadian society, as they expressed sentiments of feeling like an outsider, regardless of how long they lived and worked in Canada. If adult immigrants are unable to modify their accent, this may lead to a permanent feeling of exclusion from the culture of the target language. Jenks’ (2013) observation that “tensions and contradictions exist with interactants’ sense of identity in relation to English (p. 168)” suggests the professional and social development of these women within the new culture will continue to be hindered.

**The desire to eliminate one's accent.** All three participants felt a desire to reduce or eliminate their accent, but accepted that this was not possible. They felt that their linguistic knowledge and understanding of English continued to develop with further exposure to the language, and they felt that they were able to adequately communicate their message due to their comprehension of English vocabulary, grammar and sentence structure. They also felt that English Language classes served little purpose for them when they initially arrived in Canada, due to the time constraints and the inability of the courses to address their specific professional needs. They felt they were more suited towards learning the language by interacting with natives in the workplace or with their own children. Lai (2015) echoes this sentiment when noting that “it is important to help language learners understand the importance of diversifying their learning experiences by selecting and using out-of-class learning activities and venues in ways that compensate for what is lacking in their in-class learning” (p. 308). Examples of this include “reading novels in English, watching English language movies, playing computer games in English, online chatting, and so on” (Lai, 2015, p. 308). Additionally, the participants felt that they did not have the time required to adequately learn a language in a classroom setting, due to the fact that they were required to enter the workplace as soon as possible, in order to support their families. Although they felt that they had a working or native fluency in English, they continue to feel that their accent is an inhibiting factor that they wished to eliminate.



## **Theoretical Analysis of Findings**

In addressing the research question, five additional questions were also posed in the literature review. These questions are as follows:

- (1) Which factors influence the development of an accent?
- (2) What is fluency?
- (3) What is the goal of language learning?
- (4) Which version of English should be taught in North America?
- (5) What is the societal effect of having a foreign accent?

The narratives of the three female participants provide further confirmation of the themes presented in the literature. Although research suggests a shift from a focus on native-like mastery within language learning to the goal of intelligibility and comprehensibility, it remains that English Language Learners (ELLs) in North America continue to feel discriminated against by their accented English, and they encounter questions regarding their competence. And yet, the listener's own bias often goes unexamined. For instance, a familiar accent or speech that is accented to a lesser degree may pass as more intelligible than foreign or heavily accented speech. If a listener feels a sense of burden when decoding the meaning of an utterance or is distracted by background noise, then the speaker is viewed as being less comprehensible even though the speaker may be highly intelligible. Research by Bailey (1978), Carlson and McHenry (2011), Levin et al. (2014) and Trofimovich & Isaacs (2012) suggests that this type of discrimination may have more to do with societal power struggles than comprehension issues, as certain accents appear to be favoured by native listeners over others. Due to the fact that there is a preference for certain accents over others, employees are being asked to use technology or take classes in order

to alter their speech in order to retain their positions in employment. Although the shift to intelligibility in language instruction has been encouraged, the present study suggests language learners continue to feel discriminated against if they have not achieved a native-like mastery of English in Canada.

The present study provides a voice to female adult ELLs and explores whether they feel discriminated against based on their perceived foreign accent. Overall, the study provides a metropolitan Canadian context to the North American literature. This is integral because Canada is a multicultural nation that provides professional opportunities for foreigners, so we must confront any discrimination that is happening to speakers with perceived foreign accents.

### **Recommendations for Action**

The findings in this study suggest that adult immigrant women feel a sense of discrimination in the workplace, even though they may not be visible minorities. Due to the fact that this issue is often left unaddressed, little has been done to ameliorate the problem. All workers should be made aware of this discrimination and reflect on their own listener bias when communicating with accented speakers. Accepting that there is indeed a bias towards familiar accents and against unfamiliar accents will prompt employees in all levels of management to reflect on their hiring or promotion practices. It will also encourage the colleagues of accented speakers to make an effort to include the input of accented speakers, without dismissing them based on the linguistic burden on the listener's own comprehension. In a multicultural society such as Canada, there will be accented speakers in all levels of the professional sphere, and all parties involved must be required to identify and reflect on their listener bias, in order to raise awareness to the issues discussed by the participants in this study, as well as the literature, and work towards eliminating them. The goal is to create a workplace environment where the

compilation of native and non-native speakers is accepted as the norm, and the speaker is not discriminated against based on their perceived foreign accent.

### **Limitations of the Study**

A limitation in the literature is that the articles chosen were centered in a North American context and focused solely on English language acquisition. It may be beneficial to conduct a review of whether language learners in other continents or learners of other languages experience the same level of discrimination. This would outline if this is a societal issue in North America or a global phenomenon. Perhaps the issue resides in the fact that English is a globally driven language and dominates most domains in North America, so native speakers are not as exposed to the process of acquiring a second language as a speaker of a minority language would be. This may result in the discrimination outlined above.

Additionally, there are longitudinal limitations in the studies, as most did not analyze the long-term effects of accent on intelligibility, specifically in the workplace. The study served to create a narrative of approximately 20 years for each of the participants' professional working life in Canada. It would be beneficial to look into whether there is a difference in how much discrimination is felt by a speaker who is in the process of learning English and one who has mastered the linguistic components of the language to a native-like degree, yet continues to speak with a perceived foreign accent. Additionally, since there is no standard for measuring intelligibility (Munro & Derwing, 1995, p. 76), the studies approach the question from many different angles, and offer few opportunities for consensus. This is a very broad topic that can be approached from many sides.

Limitations to the research in the proposed study may be that the sample of participants is not representative of all cultures in Canada, nor does it take the male perspective into

consideration. The present study explores the female perspective of a small sample, without attempting to make generalizations across different categories or within the same category. The female participants are being asked to self-identify as accented-speakers and communicate their accounts of discrimination when speaking to native speakers. This serves as a starting point for further research that may look into how specific cultures are discriminated against, or if there is a difference in the level of discrimination felt by women and men. It may also be of interest to interview female immigrants who have achieved a native accent, or who speak with a familiar accent (such as English or Australian), in order to examine whether there are similarities in levels of discrimination they felt at the workplace. This study may additionally serve as a starting point to evaluate overall discrimination felt by women in the workplace. Finally, all of the participants are adults, so further research may consider discrimination felt by school-aged children or adolescents.

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## **Appendix A: Formal/Structured Interview Questions**

### **Written Interview Questions**

**Please provide the following background information.**

1. What is your name?
2. How old are you?
3. When did you arrive in Canada?
4. What city do you live in and when did you arrive there?
5. Have you lived in other Canadian cities? If so, when?
6. Do you have a post-secondary degree and, if so, where did you acquire it and how many years did it take?
7. What is your current profession?
8. What are your previous profession(s) in Canada?
9. What are your previous profession(s) in Yugoslavia?

**Please reflect on your educational and professional experiences in Canada when answering the following questions.**

1. How would you describe your spoken English-language fluency? (e.g., I speak English with native fluency; I speak English with functional fluency; I speak English with limited fluency).
2. When you first arrived to Canada, which obstacles did you face?
3. Which obstacles do you continue to face in your current profession?
4. What do you feel is your biggest obstacle when it comes to being understood by native English-language speakers?
5. Have you taken English language classes in order to increase your fluency for professional reasons? If so, did you notice a change in your pronunciation or your ability to be understood by native English-language speakers?
6. If you could change something about the way you speak English, what would you change? If you would change something, why is this important to you?



7. Do you feel that being a woman affects your professional success in your current role? Please explain.
8. Do you feel that having a perceived foreign accent affects your success in your current role? Please explain.
9. Do you feel that your competence or intelligence is questioned by native English-language listeners when you speak? Please explain.
10. Is there anything else you would like to add regarding your educational or professional experiences in Canada, relating to your perceived foreign accent?

## Appendix B: Informed Consent Form

**Study name:** How do Three Immigrant Women from Former Yugoslavia Perceive the Role of Accent in Intelligibility and Comprehensibility in the Canadian Workplace?

**Researcher:**

Sanja Vujinovic, supervised by Dr. John Ippolito  
Masters Candidate, York University  
Graduate Program in Education  
[Sanja.Vujinovic@edu.yorku.ca](mailto:Sanja.Vujinovic@edu.yorku.ca)

**Purpose of the research:** I am researching whether or not three adult female English as a second language learners feel that their perceived foreign accents affect their professional success in a Canadian context. My literature review indicates that foreign accented speakers are perceived as being less comprehensible than native speakers, by native listeners. I will be interviewing the participants in order to see if their experiences reflect the literature. Recent trends in language instruction have moved away from the achievement of a native-like accents, towards the goal of intelligibility and comprehensibility. By surveying and interviewing the participants, my objective is to outline whether or not female adult English language learners view their perceived foreign accents as an obstacle in the professional sphere.

**What you will be asked to do in the research:** You will be asked to complete written interview questions, administered over email, and engage in a free-ranging discussion, once the written interview questions have been submitted and analyzed by the researcher. The total estimated time commitment for your participation will be 2-3 hours.

**Risks and discomforts:** Possible risks are related to anonymity and emotional discomfort. Given your relationship to the other participants and to the researcher, it is not possible to ensure your anonymity in regards to the other participants. Emotional upset may additionally result due to the recalling of discriminatory treatment.

**Benefits of the research and benefits to you:** You will be given the opportunity to share your experiences and allow the researcher to draw conclusions that would be beneficial to individuals and institutions engaged in adult language learning. This will allow you to contribute towards the advancement of adult language education, and take an active role in eliminating workplace discrimination. You will be giving a voice to other immigrant women whom have faced similar discrimination in the workplace, and you will play a key role in cultivating public awareness of the role of accent in the discrimination of immigrants. Additionally, you may combat any feelings of helplessness, due to the discrimination you have experienced.

**Voluntary participation:** Your participation in the study is completely voluntary and you may choose to stop participating at any time. Your decision not to volunteer will not influence the relationship you may have with the researcher or the nature of your relationship with York University either now, or in the future.

**Withdrawal from the study:** You can stop participating in the study at any time, for any reason, if you so decide. Your decision to stop participating, or to refuse to answer particular questions, will not affect your relationship with the researchers, York University, or any other group associated with this project. In the event you withdraw from the study, all associated data collected will be immediately destroyed wherever possible.

**Confidentiality:** Confidentiality will be provided to the fullest extent possible by law. The data will be kept confidential, stored on a personal computer that is password protected and can only be accessed by the researcher. The data will be securely stored from the time collected to two years following the completion of the study.

This research has been reviewed and approved by the Human Participants Review Sub-Committee, York University's Ethics Review Board and conforms to the standards of the Canadian Tri-Council Research Ethics guidelines. If you have any questions about this process, or about your rights as a participant in the study, you may contact the Senior Manager and Policy Advisor for the Office of Research Ethics, 5<sup>th</sup> Floor, York Research Tower, York University, telephone 416-736-5914 or e-mail [ore@yorku.ca](mailto:ore@yorku.ca)

**Legal rights and signatures:** I, \_\_\_\_\_, consent to participate in "How do three immigrant women from former Yugoslavia perceive the role of accent in intelligibility and comprehensibility in the Canadian workplace" conducted by Sanja Vujinovic. I have understood the nature of this project and wish to participate. I am not waiving any of my legal rights by signing this form. My signature below indicates my consent.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Principal Investigator Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date