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## Languages Divided: Segregation and the Role of Linguistic Prejudice in Speaker Evaluation

Mary E. Kohn  
*Kansas State University*

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# Languages divided

*Segregation and the role of linguistic prejudice in speaker evaluation*

Dr. Mary Kohn  
Championing Civility Week Engagement Symposium  
Reconstructing Civility: Modes of Engagement for 2017  
Tuesday April 11, 2017

Department of English

[kohn@ksu.edu](mailto:kohn@ksu.edu)

## 1. When does communication fail?

## 2. Speakers are culturally embedded

“The boundaries between the races had become geographic rather than social, and that legacy of physical separation remains a fixture of urban and suburban America.... school policy and housing markets shaped each other so extensively that a line cannot be drawn between them” (Benjamin 2012:227).

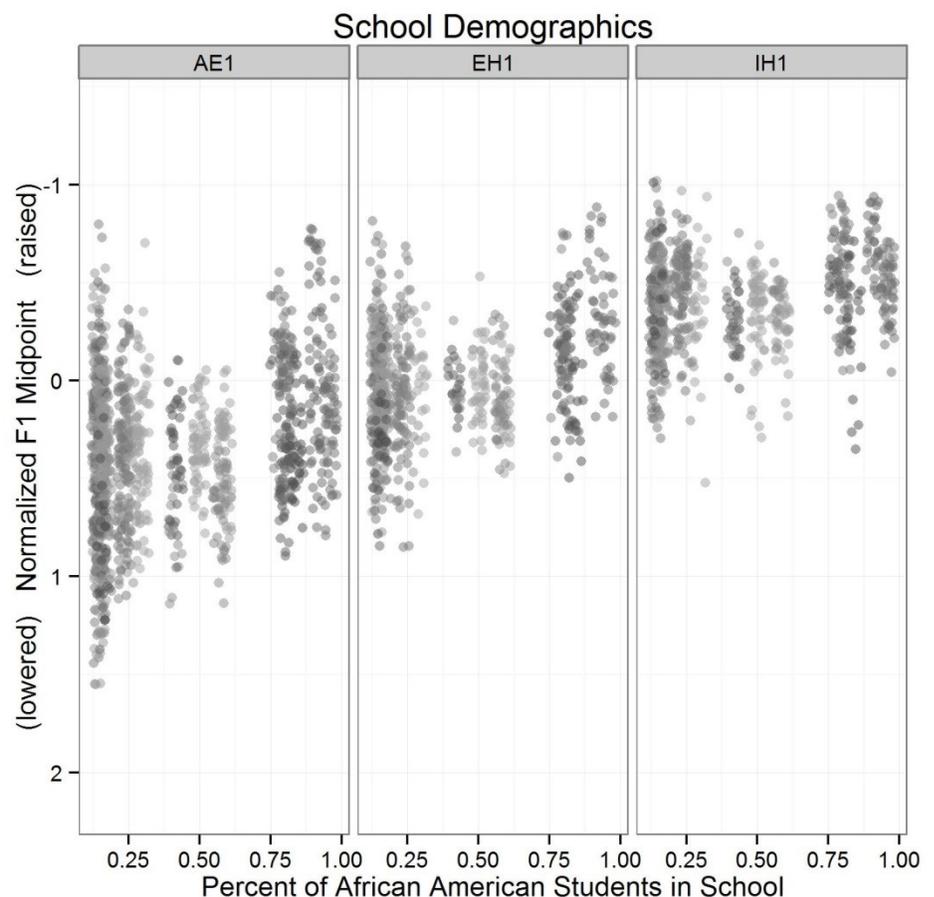
**How does segregation affect the way we speak?** To explore this question, I conducted a study on the correlation between pronunciation and school segregation analyzing the speech of 30 participants from 15 schools in Raleigh/Durham/Chapel Hill, NC, measuring an acoustic correlate of tongue height in 2,352 stressed vowels.

**Fig. 1.** Acoustic correlates of African American English accent arranged by percentage of African American students in the schools. There is a highly significant correlation between pronunciation and school demographics (Kohn, Forthcoming)

Our communities influence everything from our accents to our ideas of what is polite (Lippi-Green 2012).

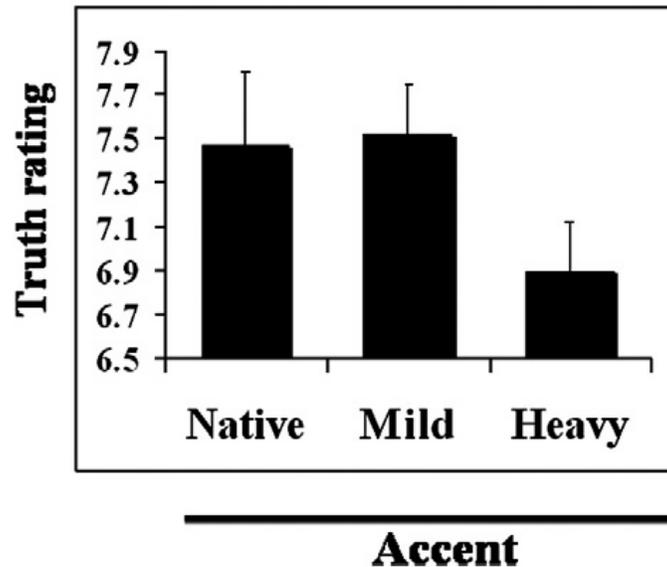
**The way individuals talk is shaped by their communities and social histories.**

**Why does this matter for effective communication?**



### 3. Listeners are culturally embedded

Experimental evidence suggests these differences affect our social perception of others, as well as our willingness to listen closely. Figure 2 from Lev-Ari and Keysar (2010) illustrates this point. Participants were asked to rate whether speakers with varying degrees of native accents were telling the truth when uttering statements like “Ants don’t sleep.”



**Fig. 2.** Truth ratings as a function of accent in Experiment 2. The y axis indicates distance in cm from the *Definitely False* pole of the scale, so higher numbers indicate higher perceived truth.

Participants were less likely to believe those with heavy foreign accents. This finding supports the general observation from Lindemann & Subtirelu (2013) that “linguistic features ...reliably result in negative evaluations of some nonlinguistic characteristics of the speaker.”

### 4. Strategies

Education has been found to mitigate the influences of accent discrimination (Kang & Rubin 2012), but there are other ways to amplify diverse voices as well. At this moment I’d like to leave time to discuss some of these strategies.

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