**Wil Hardman** Hello everyone, so my name is Wil Hardman and I work as English for Academic Purposes tutor at the University of Liverpool. I'm delighted today to be able to talk to Dr Vijay Ramjattan from the University of Toronto who does some important and inspirational work on accent racism in the English language teaching industry. And workplaces more generally and he also has a fantastic Twitter account where he regularly challenges language ideologies and discriminatory language practices so you should check that out as well. So, Hi Vijay, could you give us a brief introduction?

**Vijay Ramjattan** Sure, yeah, so thanks very much. Wil for inviting me. Yeah, so once again, my name is Vijay Ramjattan. I'm an instructor in the University of Toronto, so I teach in the International Foundation program, which is basically a bridging program for international students who want to study at the university, but they just need to sort of develop their academic English skills to move on. I also consider myself a fledgling researcher, so most of my research interests pertain to these intersections of language and race, and like you mentioned, I'm I really think about the workplace in particular, but I'm also thinking about education at the same time, so it's really about maybe workplace learning for me as well. And I do think a lot about accents recently, so I think you know our conversation will probably talk a lot about accents today. So yeah, I'm happy to speak with you.

**Wil Hardman** Thanks. Thanks Vijay. And so yeah, focusing on your research areas then, how did you first get interested in the topic?

**Vijay Ramjattan** Yes, I think, you know, when I think about language and race in general, you know, most of my professional experience is in English language teaching, and I often found that you know my my racial identity often, you know, made people perceive my language in in a specific way. So oftentimes, when new students would come into my classroom when I was beginning as an English language teacher, they would be confused like they would think I was a student like they were. They would always ask me, ‘excuse me, are you the teacher?’ There's always this scepticism about my my English language skills, but they just thought I was a so-called non-native speaker of English. I identify as a so-called native speaker of English because English is my first and dominant language, but basically because of, you know, my racial identity. I thought students and colleagues and employers sort of devalued my, you know, my my language right on account of my race. So that was sort of, these sort of everyday experiences made me realize, when we're thinking about language in the workplace, oftentimes race, the race of the worker, right and racism right, in particular,often informs how how workers are judged, right? So that was sort of the beginning of me kind of thinking about, you know how language, racism and work all intersect with each other. Recently I've been thinking more specifically about accents and how accent is kind of important in the workplace is often perceived as a sort of skill or qualification you need to get a job or to advance it your job. But once again I think racism in particular often plays a role in in in this sort of commodification of accent, because you know, if you have, if you're non white and you have a so-called foreign accent right? It's going to make your job searching experience, like your workplace experiences, kind of, you know, more difficult than, you know, your white counterparts, so that's kind of, you know, the general themes that I kind of think about more recently, yeah.

**Wil Hardman** OK, thanks and in the second part there you're talking about like accent and and racism, the connection and and maybe sometimes people don't always see that link. They think that really you're just talking about, you know, they they're separate things. You know one thing is how you pronounce words and the other thing is like racism. So how are they related? Or are they related?

**Vijay Ramjattan** Yeah, so that's a good question. So I think umm well, I just want to be specific here that I'm we're mostly talking about speech accent today, right? So, vocal accents. So I think when we think about racism, we often think about racism as a visual oppression, right? We we see someone and based on their phenotype, we we we behave a certain way, we judge them, we we, we, you know, perform such an action actions right? Based on what they look like. But with racism we have to remember that it's multi sensory. So it's not always about you know seeing and then oppressing someone. It's also about hearing a person's voice and then also oppressing them. So I think a lot of people think that accent and language in general is sort of disembodied, right? But we have to remember that you know, when we're hearing an accent, we're, we're, we're making assumptions about the person behind the accent, so we just have to remember once again that racism is auditory and because of that, the way that we perceive different accents can perpetuate racism in different ways. Yeah, so that was so. That's basically what I think. I think you know, accent is an auditory expression of racism.

**Wil Hardman** Yeah, and so because you said some assumptions, could you give some examples of some of the assumptions that you might have then?

**Vijay Ramjattan** About a person's accent?

**Wil Hardman** Yeah, yeah. Basically if you’re kind of listening to someone's accent, you said you might make certain assumptions about that?

**Vijay Ramjattan** Yeah, yeah, so I think the thing with accent. We have a lot of folk linguistic ideas about accent. We think accent you know means certain things about a person, right? But so a lot of the times we might associate it with certain, you know, character traits, right? So we might say OK, this person is intelligent or non-intelligent, this person is trustworthy or not trustworthy, this person you know is you know attractive or not attractive right? So I think a lot of character traits we associate with accent. But of course you know these traits, your accent has nothing to do with any of these types of traits. When we bring race and racism into it right? We might say, you know, a person from a certain ethnoracial group doesn't sound, you know, intelligent or doesn't sound trustworthy. So I think you know a lot of the times we're, we're, we're using accents to, you know, gather social information about people but this social information is not, you know, accurate right? Based on the accent right there. This is one example where we wanna separate accent from the person.

**Wil Hardman** Thank you, that's a really clear explanation and so could you give me some examples of how this accent racism or accent discrimination could manifest itself in the university context as that’s the context this interview is aimed for?

**Vijay Ramjattan** Yeah, yes. I think when we think about, you know accent, racism or just accent discrimination in general, we think about, think about it on the micro level, right? We think about it in terms of you know interpersonal interactions. I mean, you know, and one example of that, of course, is, especially, you know, in the North American context, I don't know the exact term that you might use in the UK, but there are a lot of international teaching assistants, right? So these are international graduate students who take up teaching positions while they're doing their graduate degrees, just to gain, you know, teaching experience and and so on. So in the North American context, students often complain about the accents of these international TAs because they're perceived to be interfering with the students learning, right? So they think, OK, I can't understand my my TA because they have this, you know, incomprehensible accent, so I'm I'm not getting my money's worth. I'm paying all of this tuition to get a quality education and you know, I can't understand, you know, the content of the course, so when we see these everyday interactions between students and ITAs, we see accent being used as a scapegoat, right? For for students, learning, right?

So that's sort of one example of how we see accents and discrimination and racism, you know, play out on the micro level, but we also have to remember that uh, accent can sort of be prevalent in sort of the the meso and you know macro level of universities right? So if you think about university language policies for example right, so you know some universities don't have an explicit language policy, but you know the de facto policy is often the so-called standardized standard English right? And with the standard English you have to have to sort of standardized grammar standardized accent. So I think you know whether it's sort of the curricula, the pedagogy, textbooks, other learning materials. Oftentimes, we we enforce a specific type of accent or specific way of speaking in general for students,

so both on the micro and, you know, meso and macro levels. Accent sort of sustains these different types of inequalities.

**Wil Hardman** It's really interesting that you kind of differentiate between those different levels as well, because you know if I think about my context, I've definitely heard students saying those things I can't understand such and such a lecturer because they have this accent and they kind of create this hierarchy of accents like, ah I can understand this one better, and certain accents are easier to understand from different countries. And you know, obviously it's important to challenge those ideas as well, but I think, maybe much worse than that, arguably is that university policy level isn't it because the university should know better. They should know how to deal with that.

**Vijay Ramjattan** Yeah, that's kind of hypocritical as well because a lot of universities might have, you know, you know, like a critical ethnic studies department, or they might. There's a lot of critical researchers in universities, but you know, despite having all of this expertise right, universities still sort of perpetuate this linguistic status quo, so it's kind of interesting how the university can be critical in some ways, but you know not critical you know with regards to something like language and accents in particular.

**Wil Hardman** And I mean, yeah, no, this next question is still relevant, so is accent discrimination at university more of an issue for people, I mean, because you talked about native and non-native speakers or people who don't speak English as their first language. Is it more of an issue for them?

**Vijay Ramjattan** I, I think it's definitely another barrier that they have to sort of overcome, because certainly you know, you know, learning or using another language you know is, you know, is difficult, right? And so if people are criticizing you because of your accent, right? That's just another extra, you know, linguistic burden to sort of, you know, try to overcome. But having said that, accent discrimination isn't limited to, you know so called non-native English speakers or non-native speakers in general right so? You know students from you know working class backgrounds or, uh, you know other racialized students who may be born and raised in in countries like UK might have, you know non standardized accents which are sort of discriminated against and you know everyday encounters, or you know, within the curricula and stuff like that. So I think yeah, it accent discrimination is more pervasive than we than we might think initially. It's, it's not just because it's not just foreign accents, right? It's all types of you know, marginalized accents.

**Wil Hardman** OK, and then so then it comes to like the kind of the next obvious next question is what can we do about it? What can we do about accent racism in higher education and or in universities?

**Vijay Ramjattan** Yes, I think maybe just to kind of repeat some of the things that I said. So I think first of all you know at the policy level and certainly you know in terms of public awareness-raising, I think we have to understand, like when it comes to racism in particular, once again, racism is an auditory type of oppression. It's not something that's just about vision. So I think people have to really understand that you know accent and race and racism are all interconnected. So that's one thing that I think we should do. Just moving to the micro level or just the interpersonal level? I think I'm going back to, you know, examples like ITAs and, and their undergraduate students. I think there has to be more formal opportunities for students to sort of gain some, you know, listening training or something, some type of workshop or some sort of formal, you know, education on how to interact with with people of different you know ethnoracial and linguistic backgrounds. So one thing that I'm always you know, endorsing is sort of reconceptualising intelligibility, right, so I think oftentimes we think of intelligibility as a personal trait of a particular type of person or a particular type of voice, but you know from you know more scholarly perspective, at least so you know intelligibility is this is the end goal of communication. It's something that both parties have to work towards. So when we think about, you know, training students to listen to different types of accents, we have to help them understand that you know, listening is a part of you know, commutative success, right? So be to help each other be intelligible, right? We have to learn how to listen to each other, and so part of that listening is of course maybe being exposed to different types of accents, but you know, it's also about having sort of this critical social linguistic training as well as understanding how how we're always listening with an ideological filter, right? So listening is not neutral like many other, you know bodily practices, so I think. You know we wanna sort of interrogate how we listen to people and how race and racism can inform how we we listen to each other. So that's more on you know in terms of you know, interpersonal training and just going back to policies as well, because we talked about language policies. I think, you know, universities really have to think more critically about allowing a range of linguistic performances to be acceptable in the university, right? So even thinking beyond accent, right? To have different types of writing, you know different types of you know, modalities of language. So I think we should be more accepting at the university level of different ways of expressing ourselves and one of which might be, you know, accepting you know an array of accents, yeah.

**Wil Hardman** Yeah, definitely like, I think it kind of at the macro level, the assessments can be such a powerful area to focus on can’t it, because obviously that's what students work towards and it’s what teachers work towards as well. So I think it's you know it's very powerful. I mean, one thing, one thing we're doing at the language centre with our speaking assessments is we've been trying to change the criteria so it's more focused on the ideas they’re producing and how they're interacting with each other, erm, rather than focusing on kind of the pronunciation and the, you know, the objective pronunciation of certain, you know, sounds, because obviously that is focused on are they conforming to standardized English.

**Vijay Ramjattan** Yeah, I think that there's definitely, you know, room for, like training the trainers as well. So just based on what you said right? Because with assessment and we're thinking about, you know listening and speaking, right? Like, like I mentioned before, if intelligibility is something that's jointly created between both communicative parties, right, when it comes to assessment, right? We really have to really pay attention to how the listeners are assessing, you know, the speaker, right, so, uh? Yeah, once again, right? We need to sort of critically interrogate you know, how assessment, how we're how we're framing assessment, how we're actually conducting the assessment and reviewing assessment and so on, right? So there's a lot of reflection that needs to happen, basically.

**Wil Hardman** Yeah definitely, I also wanted to pick up on something else you said, I think that’s more at the meso level, is that right, that’s the lower one, yeah the meso?

**Vijay Ramjattan** I think, so yeah. They’re all interconnected.

**Wil Hardman** Yeah, yeah and you said about having kind of workshops and where different speakers come together because again that made me think about our practice so I do this course, it’s like a General English course open to all students at the university, erm, called, it’s called Speaking at University and you do get some native speakers or home students, or you know, all these terms aren’t great, but, you know what I mean, and they come, but it’s very rare that they come to the session, so the majority of the students who come are students who don’t speak English as first language and so we explore things like different accents and all those issues. But then if those, you know, native students aren't coming then, the intelligibility, the raising awareness of that is only going one way, isn’t it? It's, er, yeah, it's not tackling the problem.

**Vijay Ramjattan** Yeah, it's definitely, you know, easier said than done. Like you know, I, I haven't, you know, I haven't conducted any of these types of workshops, or you know, that's something you know I'm trying to figure out with regard to my own, you know, practice, but I think you know, one thing to to think about when it comes to, you know, learning how to listen as well as that you know, sometimes we might understand each other perfectly and we might still have discriminatory understandings about each other's accent language practices, right? So I might hear a person's accent. I perfectly understand it, I I think, you know there's nothing wrong with it, but I might say you know it's, it's still “inappropriate”. I'm using air quotes for listeners here, but, you know, I might think it's, it's, you know, inappropriate for you know like professional space, right? I think you still need to. Maybe change your accent, right? So I think with these types of training we have to really once again dig deeper and understand that you know understanding each other is not enough. We have to really understand that you know, no matter the context, the communicative context, a range of linguistic phonological performances are OK right? And you can still get your job done no matter how you sound, for example, right?

**Wil Hardman** Yeah, yeah, definitely. And yeah, one thing you want to tweet about, which I'm really interested in, is about how people could be discriminated against because of their name. So could you tell us a bit more about that? And also we can kind of, you know, connected to the university context as well.

**Vijay Ramjattan** Uh, yeah, sure. So I think you know names are names are sacred first of all, right? So it's something you know your parents give you, you know it has a lot of meaning. It's tied to your identity in many ways, but sadly you know people will use your name right to make judgments about you. So if we think about, you know the workplace context in particular, right? So just say you're applying for a job and you send in your CV or your resume, and you know the employer might look at your name, and you know based on the name they might decide OK whether or not you're worthy for an interview or not, right? So there's a lot of research you know, especially in the North American context of how you know so called non-white sounding names, right? Get less callbacks for interviews than so-called white sounding names, right? So you know so my name, for example Vijay, if I put my name on a resume it might not get a callback, whereas you know maybe Wil for example, right might get a callback right more easily, so you know, name discrimination is also another proxy for, you know, racial discrimination once again, so if you don't want to hire someone of a specific ethnoracial background, you can use their name to sort of quietly whittle them out of the applicant pool. You know, in terms of names and you know, thinking about education and higher education in particular, you know both of us, you know, we, we, we teach international students right? And a lot of times students will, will change their names, right? So I have a lot of Chinese students and virtually maybe you know 99% of them will, well, will change their name to a so-called English name, right? So one reason that they do this is because you know, first of all people mispronounce their Chinese name, so they just want something that's easier for people to pronounce. And secondly, you know they might want to develop a new identity with a new language, right? They might want to say, OK well, I'm, I'm speaking in English most of the time, so I wanna have this so-called English identity. But you know, this is a complicated topic, right? But you know, in one sense this is about conformity once again. So why does a Chinese student international student need to change their name right for people to correctly call their name, right? So I think you know, in one sense that is, sort of, another manifestation of racism. So why do people racialized people need to change their names in certain settings in order to be, you know, I'm sorry I'm drawing a blank, but be called correctly right? So I think yeah. But once again, it's kind of complicated because, you know, once again people have agency. You know at the end of the day, if you want to change your name, that's, that's your choice. But you know, everything is political, so even a name change. Or, you know, even keeping your name could still be, uh, a struggle right on certain levels, yeah so that's another example of how names you know are important when we think about you, know racism and acts of racism.

**Wil Hardman** Yeah yeah yeah, that’s a great explanation and example and yeah it’s like you say it's like there's nothing wrong with you changing your name if that's what you want to do and you're doing that from like a position of power and it's something that you really want to do rather than because you think oh well, this person probably pronounce my name in in the classroom and so I'm just gonna change it to make to make life a bit easier for them really, and it takes me back. I remember when I first started teaching in in EAP at universities and so I was moving from a kind of English language teaching context to an EAP context and one of the one of the tutors said to me he said, OK, well your class is going to be mostly Chinese students, yeah, and so you're gonna find it hard to remember all the names, so what you know what you should do is ask them to give to give you like you said, their English name, their nickname and even then, I just thought well, that just, there was something that felt really wrong about them and I didn't I didn't do that because I couldn't imagine how that interaction would, would happen. You know what I mean? And I remember I remember saying to them to the class that you know if anybody you know does have another name for me to call you by then you know, let me know but then but then, when I reflect now, I think, I mean like last year actually there were two students who who did this workshop, two Chinese students on Chinese sounds, and it's difficult but a lot of the teachers went to that and tried to learn and at least I feel like a little bit better and trying to pronounce those names and maybe that's the important thing, kind of making the effort to do it and giving students the option, I don't know.

**Vijay Ramjattan** Yeah, I think basically it's all about communication, right? So like really having honest conversations, so students will change their name and you know when you get to talk to them, you might realize, OK, they just changed it because once again people were just mispronouncing their original name. So I think, yeah, like having, you know, workshops being exposed to how to Chinese sounds for example, these are good steps that we can take to sort of make a more welcoming atmosphere right for marginalized students, so I think, yeah, that's great.

**Wil Hardman** OK, and so just finally, then and just tell us like what are you working on now or what's next? And how can we find out more about your work?

**Vijay Ramjattan** Yes, I think, uh, like you mentioned, I'm on Twitter a lot so umm, if you ,if you like my, my ramblings about language race, work, accent stuff, feel free to follow me, my handle is @Vijay-Ramjattan. I recently made a personal website for myself, so it's vijay-ramjattan.com.

**Wil Hardman** Oh I’ve not seen that one, I’ll have to check it out.

**Vijay Ramjattan** Yeah, I have it on my Twitter bio so you can click on it then you can see all my publications and I put some videos of talks I've done on, on these topics that we talked about today. You know, and one thing that I'm trying to do in the summer I'm, I'm working on a book proposal so I'm trying to convert my doctoral dissertation on international teaching assistants into an academic book so that's my writing goal for the summer, so if it gets accepted, you know, stay tuned for hopefully a book about accents and, and labor and academic experiences of international teaching assistants.

**Wil Hardman** Cool. That sounds really cool, so thank you so much for your time and speaking to me today and I thought it was really interesting so thanks.

**Vijay Ramjattan** Thanks very much Wil for the conversation.