**Ulrike Bavendiek** Hello and welcome to the series “Accent racism, linguistic stereotyping and ethnic accent bullying in higher education”. My name is Ulrike Bavendiek, I'm Senior Lecturer in German Studies and director of the Centre for Teaching Excellence at the University of Liverpool. With this project we aim to raise awareness of accents, our perception of accents and our responses to them in the higher education context.

In this part of the series I'm very happy to welcome Dr Shiri Lev-Ari, who is a lecturer in psychology at Royal Holloway, University of London. Shiri, could you give us a brief introduction about yourself and your research interests?

**Shiri Lev-Ari** Sure. So my name is Shiri Lev-Ari, and as you said I’m a lecturer in psychology, at the Royal Holloway University of London, and my research really looks at language processing and languages, but my interest is looking at it from a social perspective. So I care about how social knowledge and the social environment really influence how we process and use language, but also I care about how the way that we use language actually has social consequences, and that’s related to the study we're really going to talk about today.

**Ulrike Bavendiek** Okay. So, in your talk with the title, “Why don't we believe non-native speakers and how can exposure to foreign accents reduce this bias” you argue that people tend to believe information less, so there is lower trust in the information or truthfulness of information, when this information is provided in accented speech. In other words, people believe less what is said with an accent. Can you explain how you came to that conclusion?

**Shiri Lev-Ari** Yeah. So in terms of what I actually found, and that is that people believe less what non-native speakers say, so I gave participants a very simple task. I played to them different statements, things such as “A giraffe can go without water longer than a camel can” or “The sun shrinks five feet every hour”, and some of the statements are true, and some of them are not. And the task the participants had was to try to guess how likely this statement is to be true. Now, the main manipulation of course was whether participants hear those statements from native speakers or from non-native speakers. So I actually ran such a study twice. So the last time it was here in the UK so I had native speakers of British English listening to either native speakers of British English or Polish accented speakers. In the prior iteration I ran it in the United States. I had native speakers of American English listening to either native speakers of American English or non-native speakers from a whole variety of accents. I had Korean and Italian and Turkish and also Polish, and really a wide variety. And in both cases, so it doesn't matter what the foreign accent was, in both cases, when participants needed to decide whether a statement was true or not, they rated the statements as more likely to be true if they were read by native speakers compared to non-native speakers. Now in terms of why they do that, I’m not sure, should I explain that?

**Ulrike Bavendiek** Uhm, yes. Basically that would have been my next question anyway. So, why is it? Why do you think that is?

**Shiri Lev-Ari** So the general idea of why participants do that, why people believe something more if they hear it from native speakers, the reason is that it's harder to process what non-native speakers say, so it takes, even when we perfectly understand each and every word that non-native speakers say, we need to put in more effort in order to understand them. And we actually know that in general, we tend to trust less things that are harder to process. So just to read that, just because they find it harder to process something, you're going to believe it less and in this case you're going to believe the non-native speakers less. So that’s going to be true even if you have, even if you have no prejudice, if you have no bias against non-native speakers. Just because for everyone it’s going to be harder to process foreign accented speech, people are going to believe it less.

**Ulrike Bavendiek** That’s really interesting, thank you, yes. So when you say that the ease of processing, processing information, influences the degree to which we believe that information, are there any other biases, apart from believing? So, apart from judging the truthfulness of a statement, are there any other biases resulting from the ease, or difficulty of processing information?

**Shiri Lev-Ari** Yeah, so, all the time we actually make many inferences just from how easy or hard it is to process something. And we're not aware of the fact that we do that, but we do it all the time. And for the most part, people tend to infer negative things from relative difficulty of processing. So for example, people like things less if they're harder to process, and people also think that some things are riskier if they're harder to process, and there is murky evidence, but potentially people also think that things are less morally sound or basically less ethical, if they're harder to process. Although, like I said, the evidence there is even more mixed.

**Ulrike Bavendiek** Uh huh. But that would be really a very severe consequences of having an accent. If so, a lot of things to research probably in the future.

Right. So, when a listener easily processes a message, let's say, they listen, in other words, they would listen to a message without a strong non-standard accent, what do they, the listeners think are the reasons for them understanding the information with this relative ease? So when a listener processes a language easily, yeah, so they listen to a message, and there's not a strong non-standard accent. What do the listeners think are the reasons for them understanding the information with relative ease? Do they ascribe it to the accent or do they have other reasons why they think something is so clear?

**Shiri Lev-Ari** Yeah. So, in general, first of all I should be very clear that these whole processes are implicit. So people are unaware of the fact, they are not consciously thinking “this is easy to process”, “this is hard to process”, and they're unaware of the fact that they're actually using ease of processing in order to make different inferences. Now, people usually use relative ease of processing especially when it's different from what is expected. So, when they listen to a native speaker, but they're used to listening to a native speaker and a native speaker doesn't sound particularly easy or particularly hard but just average, then actually they're probably not going to make many inferences depending on the ease of processing. Just because usually we make the inferences when something is different from what is expected. Now we have the relative ease of in general understanding language, suddenly we encounter a non-native-speaker and it becomes harder, because there's a difference from what we're used to. That's the reason we make an inference that is a negative inference.

**Ulrike Bavendiek** Okay. Right, okay. So, is this true for people, for speakers who have an accent, a second language accent themselves, or are they, do they find it easier to process accented speech?

**Shiri Lev-Ari** Yeah, so because this is about the difficulty of processing and not about prejudice, we can also find it with non-native speakers. So when non-native speakers listen to other non-native speakers, it depends a little bit on whether the other non-native speakers they are listening to have the same accent or not. So we know that for example, if you're a native Italian speaker, you're going to find it easier to understand Italian accented English compared to a native speaker of English. And if you are a Korean native speaker of Korean, you’re going to find Korean accented English easier to understand than someone who's a native English, but… So in that case we should expect them to not be as biased, and believe the other non-native speakers more just because they don't find them harder to process the speech. But we actually know that non-native speakers find other non-native accents quite hard to understand, and often they even struggle with a foreign accent even more than native speakers do. If we think about for example the Italian and Korean speakers that I just mentioned, they would actually find each others’ accents even harder to process than the native English speakers would. Therefore they would be just as biased. And there is actually a study that tested this precisely. They actually took my previous statements and tested them with non-native speakers, and they found they basically replicated my results with non-native speakers and really showed that yeah non-native speakers are also biased against non-native speakers just because they find it hard to understand the speech. It's really like I said it's not about prejudice. It’s just about the fact that when you find something hard, you believe it less.

**Ulrike Bavendiek** Okay, thank you. So far we've talked about foreign accents, or accents of second language speakers who have learned language later on in life probably. What about accents that, say, are a feature of a particular regional dialect, for example scouse here in Liverpool, are they also harder to process and do people have biases, the same kind of biases against accented speakers from regional areas, let's say, regional dialects?

**Shiri Lev-Ari** Yeah, so when I published my study I assumed that I'm going to find the same thing in regional accents, or maybe to a slightly lesser degree assuming that they're not as hard to process as foreign accents. But since then there's actually been at least two studies that I know of that really looked at it, and both of them did not find any effect of regional accents. One of them was done in Spain, and it looked at, like, regional Spanish accents. And one of them was actually done in the UK, and it looks at Scottish accents. And in both cases, there was no effect, and it was even more interesting because the study in Scotland, actually had the regional accent conditions for the Scottish accent, but also a foreign accent condition, so with the Chinese speakers, and there was an effect for the Chinese speakers, but not the Scottish. So it’s not that there was some problem with the paradigm or anything, because they could replicate the effect for foreign accents, but not for the regional. So the question is why? So it could be that regional accents are somehow just not hard enough. One thing that I'm thinking of, but it really should be further researched, to look at is that regional accents are very systematic. So when speakers produce something, they produce it in a very predictable way. You just produce that vowel slightly differently, or you produce that consonant always in the same way. So, the regional speakers are very consistent in their own speech, and they're also very much like the other speakers of that dialect. So in that sense, you can really easily infer how someone would say something which would make it easier to adapt to the accent and to understand it. With foreign accents, first of all speakers themselves are actually not as predictable and consistent. So they keep on trying to get to the right pronunciation, but they might miss it in a different way and produce it slightly differently each and every time when they are trying to get there. And they might also slightly differ from other speakers. So in that sense it's just, it's harder to get used to and harder to process. And that might be the reason that we don't see these effects with regional accents. But like I said, there really should be further research. This is just a hypothesis.

**Ulrike Bavendiek** Certainly again very interesting to look into that. Yeah, but it’s interesting also that it doesn't seem to be the case that there’s the same bias. So, what do you think is there anything that we can do to reduce this bias against speakers with foreign accents?

**Shiri Lev-Ari** Yeah, so the positive thing that I found and this is in my latest study, is that I didn't just find that people are biased against non-native speakers, but that I actually found a way to reduce it. So the thing is that, as I said before, the reason that people are biased against non-native speakers is because it's harder to process their speech. So one way to make the speech easier to understand is by exposure. So if someone is used to listening a lot to non-native speakers, they're going to find it, with time, they're going to find the speech easier and easier and easier to understand. So for example in my study, I just gave a 10 minute exposure, of course eight different speakers, but still only 10 minutes of exposure and I managed that those who basically received the exposure before they did a task, showed smaller bias, they still showed the bias, but it was smaller so you can think that if 10 minutes can reduce your bias, then hours or days of experience can have an even bigger effect. Now it's not going to make it go away completely, because no matter how much experience we have with foreign accents, we still find it harder. But we do find it easier and easier so that's already a start. So if we think about having diverse social environments, diverse work environments, all these kind of things would basically make it easier for people to start understanding for an accented speaker.

**Ulrike Bavendiek** Okay, so basically the more accents we hear the more we get used to it and find it easier. Okay, interesting. Thank you very much.

So thank you very much, Shiri for talking to me today and for this fascinating new perspective on accents, and how we perceive them. To our listeners, thank you very much for listening to this interview. If you found this interesting, you can listen to other interviews in this series and to Shiri Lev-Ari’s full talk from the links on our website. Thank you very much.

Thank you.