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FOREIGN ACCENT AS A STRUCTURAL FACTOR OF SOCIAL STRATIFICATION IN CONTEMPORARY MIGRATION CONTEXTS (BASED ON GERMANIC LANGUAGES)

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to identify and substantiate the sociocultural mechanisms through which foreign-accented speech is perceived as a factor shaping social evaluations of speakers and contributing to the reproduction of social inequality in the context of contemporary migration. The article conceptualizes a foreign accent as a sociocultural marker embedded in processes of social categorization and institutional evaluation.

The research material comprises data from contemporary international empirical and meta-analytical studies published between 2006 and 2025, conducted primarily on Germanic languages, as well as the results of the author's own research based on German-language data. The analysis is carried out from an interdisciplinary perspective, drawing on sociolinguistic and social-psychological approaches.

The scientific novelty of the study lies in its integrative interpretation of foreign accent as a cross-domain sociolinguistic phenomenon manifested in professional, service, academic, and legal contexts and functioning as a legitimized mechanism of social differentiation. The findings demonstrate that accent-based discrimination is persistent and structural in nature, remains evident even among speakers with a high level of linguistic competence, and cannot be explained solely by objective communicative difficulties.

The study further establishes that, within the context of migration, a foreign accent acquires a stratifying function, shaping social evaluations and restricting access to symbolic and material resources.

KEYWORDS: foreign accent, accent bias, social attribution, institutional evaluation, migration context, Germanic languages

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ИНОЯЗЫЧНЫЙ АКЦЕНТ КАК СТРУКТУРНЫЙ ФАКТОР СОЦИАЛЬНОЙ СТРАТИФИКАЦИИ В УСЛОВИЯХ СОВРЕМЕННОЙ МИГРАЦИИ (НА МАТЕРИАЛЕ ГЕРМАНСКИХ ЯЗЫКОВ)

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Аннотация

Цель исследования заключается в выявлении и обосновании социокультурных механизмов восприятия иноязычного акцента как фактора, формирующего социальные оценки говорящего и способствующего воспроизводству социального неравенства в условиях современной миграции. В статье иноязычный акцент концептуализируется как социокультурный маркер, встроенный в процессы социальной категоризации и институциональной оценки.

Материал исследования составляют данные современных зарубежных эмпирических и метааналитических работ 2006–2025 гг., выполненных преимущественно на материале германских языков, а также результаты авторского исследования на материале немецкого языка. Анализ проводится в междисциплинарной перспективе с опорой на социолингвистические и социально-психологические подходы.

Научная новизна исследования заключается в интегральном осмыслении иноязычного акцента как межсферового социолингвистического феномена, проявляющегося в профессиональной, сервисной, академической и правовой сферах и функционирующего как легитимированный механизм социальной дифференциации. Полученные результаты показали, что акцентная дискриминация носит устойчивый и структурный характер, сохраняется при высоком уровне языковой компетенции и не может быть объяснена исключительно объективными коммуникативными трудностями.

Установлено, что в миграционном контексте иноязычный акцент приобретает стратифицирующую функцию, формируя социальные оценки и ограничивая доступ к символическим и материальным ресурсам.

КЛЮЧЕВЫЕ СЛОВА: иноязычный акцент, акцентная дискриминация, социальная категоризация, институциональная селекция, миграционный контекст, германские языки

1 | Introduction

The relevance of the present study is related to the sustained scholarly interest in the social meaning of linguistic variation, as well as to a clear methodological and applied gap in contemporary research. In the context of global mobility and intensified migration processes, language is increasingly conceptualized not only as a means of communication but also as a socially significant resource that reflects and shapes perceptions of status, belonging, and social acceptability [Dragojevic et al., 2018]. While socio- and psycholinguistics have extensively documented that pronunciation features influence interpersonal impressions, the evidence remains fragmented across institutional domains and is often discussed within isolated research traditions [Giles et al., 2006; Fuertes et al., 2011]. Under conditions of intensified migration and expanding multilingual communication, this fragmentation becomes a problem for language science, because accent-related evaluations increasingly affect access to institutional resources and participation in socially consequential interactions.

A particularly salient phenomenon in this respect is foreign accent. Contemporary studies show that accent can systematically shape perceptions of competence, credibility, and professional suitability in contexts where evaluative decisions carry long-term social consequences [Fuertes et al., 2011; Maindidze et al., 2025]. From a philological perspective, foreign accent is not merely individual phonetic variation but an indexical marker interpreted within language ideologies and stereotypical expectations, which may legitimate exclusion even when communicative effectiveness is preserved [Popova, 2021]. This issue is becoming more acute as accented speech becomes a routine feature of institutional communication: for instance, in international academic and business settings, non-native users of English outnumber native speakers, yet pronunciation norms continue to function as symbolic boundaries [Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010; Neeley, 2013; Sliwa & Johansson, 2014]. Comparable processes can be observed in other linguistic communities, including German-speaking contexts; this underscores the need to analyze accent perception beyond individual languages.

Recent empirical research further indicates that accent bias persists even when speakers demonstrate high linguistic competence and cannot be reduced to objective communicative difficulties such as reduced intelligibility [Giles et al., 2006; Fuertes et al., 2011]. This observation is particularly relevant for contemporary linguistics, as accent functions as a socially meaningful cue that influences evaluation across different institutional contexts, contributing to the reproduction of inequality [Bourdin et al., 2024; Teló, 2024]. In this study, migration is therefore treated not as a demographic variable but as a social condition in which linguistic features – most notably foreign accent – acquire stratifying value and shape access to institutional opportunities [Agudo, 2018].

The aim of the study is to identify and substantiate the sociocultural mechanisms underlying the perception of foreign accent as a factor that shapes social evaluations of speakers and contributes to the reproduction of social inequality in contemporary migration contexts.

To achieve the stated aim, the study addresses the following **objectives**:

- to synthesize empirical and meta-analytic evidence on accent bias across key institutional contexts (professional, service, academic, and legal);
- to identify and describe the sociocultural mechanisms through which foreign accent shapes social evaluation beyond communicative intelligibility;
- to substantiate the cross-domain and structural character of accent bias as a factor contributing to the reproduction of social inequality;
- to illustrate selected aspects of these mechanisms using evidence from German-speaking contexts and the author's German-language data.

The **research material** consists of data from contemporary international empirical and meta-analytic studies published between 2006 and 2025 that examine the perception of foreign accent and accent-based bias in different social and institutional contexts, as well as the results of the author's own study, the empirical component of which was based on a perceptual-auditory experiment involving native speakers of German without a migration background. The stimulus material comprised audio recordings of German speech produced by Russian-speaking bilinguals with varying degrees of accentedness. The study was conducted in two stages: at the first stage, the participants evaluated the degree of accentedness of the speakers using a scale ranging from “no accent” to “strongly pronounced accent”. Based on these evaluations, a set of phonograms representing different levels of accentedness was selected for further analysis. The selection was carried out using a double-blind procedure, which made it possible to include representative samples of each accent level. At the second stage, the auditors assessed the speakers according to a range of social and personal characteristics, including perceived level of education, competence, trustworthiness, and general impression. In addition, they evaluated behavioral parameters, such as willingness to make socially significant decisions (e.g., renting housing or hiring). The content of the speech was not taken into account in the evaluation.

The data obtained were processed using factor analysis and analysis of variance (ANOVA), which made it possible to identify significant differences in the evaluation of speakers depending on the degree of accentedness ($p < 0.01$). The results of the experiment show that an increase in the degree of accentedness leads to lower evaluations related to social status and competence, while assessments of personal characteristics demonstrate less pronounced variation [Popova, 2021].

The selection of **research methods** is determined by the aim and objectives of the study. Methods of theoretical analysis and synthesis were employed to systematize previous research, while elements of comparative analysis were used to identify common patterns of accent bias across institutional domains. The empirical data from the author's study were analyzed using perceptual-auditory analysis and statistical procedures (including variance analysis), followed by interpretative analysis linking the results to broader sociocultural mechanisms of evaluation.

The theoretical basis of the study consists of works in sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, and the social psychology of speech devoted to the analysis of accent as a socially significant factor in processes of social categorization and evaluation. The study draws on the research of H. Giles and colleagues [Giles et al., 2006], which conceptualizes accent as an index of social group membership influencing interpersonal perception. The analysis also takes into account findings by K. Kinzler and co-authors, demonstrating that sensitivity to accent emerges early and functions as a core dimension of social cognition [Kinzler et al., 2009]. This position is further supported by evidence provided by D. Pietraszewski and A. Schwartz, who show that accent constitutes a dedicated dimension of social categorization rather than a byproduct of other social distinctions [Pietraszewski & Schwartz, 2014]. Meta-analytic research by J. Fuertes and co-authors demonstrates the systematic impact of accent on evaluations of competence and social attractiveness, even when communicative content is held constant [Fuertes et al., 2011]. Important for the present research are studies in social psychology examining the influence of accented speech on credibility and trust [Lev-Ari & Keysar, 2010]. The analysis further relies on works addressing accent bias in professional and institutional contexts, which show that pronunciation functions as a symbolic boundary affecting employability and status attribution [Neeley, 2013; Sliwa & Johansson, 2014; Timming, 2017]. Recent large-scale reviews and meta-analyses confirm the stability and cross-contextual nature of accent bias, emphasizing its structural character across different linguistic and cultural settings [Spence et al., 2022; Maindidze et al., 2025]. The theoretical framework is complemented by the author's earlier empirical research, which examines the role of foreign accent in processes of social and personal identification on German-language material [Popova, 2021].

The **practical significance** of the study lies in the applicability of its findings to educational, academic, and professional contexts. The results may be used in university-level courses in sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, migration linguistics, and intercultural communication, as well as in specialized seminars addressing language, migration, and discrimination. The findings are also relevant for the development of teaching materials and training programs in German and other Germanic languages, particularly those aimed at raising awareness of accent-based bias. Beyond

education, the results may inform institutional practices in academic, corporate, and service settings by contributing to the design of communication training and diversity policies that distinguish between actual communicative difficulties and socially driven evaluative biases.

2 | Results and Discussion

2.1. Foreign Accent and Mechanisms of Social Evaluation

Contemporary research demonstrates that accent constitutes one of the fundamental parameters of social categorization of speakers, comparable in significance to such characteristics as gender or age. Experimental evidence indicates that pronunciation features of speech may play a more decisive role in processes of social and ethnic classification than visual characteristics or explicitly stated group membership [Kinzler et al., 2009; Rakić et al., 2011; Pietraszewski & Schwartz, 2014; Popova 2021]. In this context, foreign accent should not be regarded as a secondary phonetic feature but rather as a socially salient indexical variable involved in processes of interpretation, categorization, and evaluation.

An analysis of recent empirical studies allows for the identification of several key mechanisms through which foreign accent influences the formation of social evaluations of speakers.

The first mechanism is related to perceptual load in the processing of accented speech. Foreign accent may increase cognitive costs associated with the perception of the speech signal, thereby reducing subjective processing fluency. A number of studies have shown that decreased perceptual fluency is associated with lower perceived credibility of the information source and reduced levels of trust [Spence et al., 2022; Teló et al., 2024]. This effect is commonly explained by the fluency heuristic and has been observed across different languages and institutional contexts [Maindidze et al., 2025]. Importantly, this mechanism does not imply objective unintelligibility of speech but rather reflects a subjective experience of increased cognitive effort, which is subsequently interpreted in social-evaluative terms.

The second mechanism involves stereotypical attribution and the functioning of accent as a rapid cue for social categorization. Foreign accent operates as a trigger for dichotomies such as “in-group versus out-group” or “center versus periphery,” activating stable social and cultural stereotypes. Experimental research indicates that accent may elicit not only ethnic but also socio-economic expectations, influencing listeners’ assumptions about speakers’ educational background, income level, and professional status [Popova, 2021; Dollmann, 2024; Maindidze et al., 2025]. In this sense, accent functions as a compact social signal that enables listeners to assign speakers to particular social categories even in the absence of additional information.

A further mechanism concerns the institutional masking of accent-based discrimination. In many professional and organizational contexts, negative evaluations of foreign-accented speech are formally justified by reference to seemingly objective criteria such as speech clarity, communicative efficiency, or compliance with organizational standards. At the same time, meta-analytic reviews point to the need to distinguish between actual communicative requirements and cases in which accent serves as an indirect indicator of competence or social acceptability [Hideg et al., 2022].

These mechanisms suggest that foreign accent operates at several levels simultaneously: it affects perceptual processing, serves as a cue for social categorization, and is involved in institutional evaluative practices. Its impact on social evaluation cannot be reduced solely to individual perceptual biases but appears to be supported by stable cognitive and social processes. This becomes particularly evident in institutional contexts, where accent-based judgments are incorporated into both formal decision-making procedures and everyday interaction.

2.2. Perception of Accented Speech in Key Institutional Contexts

In recent years, research on the perception of accented speech has expanded beyond its traditional focus within sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics and now covers a wider range of social contexts. While the professional domain remains the most extensively studied area, more recent work has also addressed customer service interactions, academic settings, and legal regulation. This development reflects a shift from describing isolated effects toward viewing accent as a broader social factor.

2.2.1. Professional Contexts

A comparison of empirical and meta-analytic studies suggests that foreign accent influences interpersonal and professional evaluations of speakers in hiring contexts. A meta-analysis by Fuertes et al. showed that speakers with non-standard accents tend to receive lower ratings in terms of competence, social attractiveness, and professional suitability, regardless of speech content or formal qualifications [Fuertes et al., 2011]. Similar results have been reported in other studies, where accent is interpreted as a marker of group affiliation that activates stereotypical expectations among listeners [Giles et al., 2006; Roessel et al., 2017]. Available empirical evidence suggests that foreign accent is often associated with less favorable professional outcomes and may serve as a basis for discriminatory practices in the workplace. Such effects have been documented both in experimental studies and in analyses of real-life complaints related to discrimination on the grounds of origin and speech [Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010; Sathiyathan & Xing, 2018].

Research conducted over several decades consistently shows that foreign accent constitutes an independent factor of discrimination that cannot be reduced to candidates' ethnic background. For example, Krings and Olivares found that in the selection of immigrants for positions requiring advanced interpersonal skills, discrimination was selective and targeted representatives of specific ethnic groups associated with particular accents; in the Swiss context, this applied notably to Kosovar Albanians [Krings & Olivares, 2007].

Subsequent research has confirmed the cross-linguistic and cross-cultural universality of these effects. In Portugal, Brazilian Portuguese accent systematically reduced the likelihood of positive hiring decisions compared to European Portuguese [de Souza et al., 2016], while in English-speaking contexts, candidates with German and Spanish accents received lower hireability ratings despite identical response content [de Nijs, 2019]. An experiment by Deprez-Sims and Morris demonstrated that the negative effect of accent intensifies under conditions of low subjective intelligibility; although the gap narrows when intelligibility is high, it does not disappear entirely [Deprez-Sims & Morris, 2010].

Experimental research further indicates that foreign accent affects a broader range of social evaluations, including perceptions of trustworthiness, warmth, and moral character, which in turn influence willingness to cooperate and provide support in professional settings [Lev-Ari & Keysar, 2010].

Recent studies extend these findings by considering the degree of accent strength and audience characteristics. A study conducted in Flanders (2023–2024) showed that a female speaker with a Russian accent was rated significantly lower on hireability than speakers with regional Flemish accents given comparable qualifications, whereas differences among regional accents were not statistically significant.

2.2.2. Customer Services and Service Encounters

In the domain of customer service, accent is increasingly conceptualized not only as a factor shaping subjective evaluations of speakers but also as a determinant of concrete consumer behavior. Unlike professional hiring, where the consequences of accent bias often manifest at the institutional level, service interactions reveal its effects in everyday micro-practices of communication, directly influencing service quality and economic performance. Experimental studies show that when interacting with employees who speak with a foreign accent, customers are less likely to take initiative, demonstrate reduced willingness to cooperate, and more frequently shorten interactions, even when professional competence is held constant [Bourdin et al., 2024]. Accent also affects

perceived social closeness and trust, which in turn shapes engagement, willingness to ask clarifying questions, and propensity for empathic response [Fuertes et al., 2011].

Importantly, these evaluative processes translate into observable behavioral consequences. Customers interacting with foreign-accented service employees are more likely to curtail communication, display lower levels of cooperation, and avoid direct contact by switching to self-service channels or alternative modes of interaction. Crucially, these effects persist even when controlling for subjective intelligibility and perceived control over the interaction, indicating that stereotypical attitudes rather than genuine communicative difficulties underlie such responses [Giles et al., 2006; Huang et al., 2017; Spence et al., 2022]. As a result, accent bias in service contexts operates not merely at the level of perception but as a mechanism with tangible economic implications, reducing customer satisfaction and loyalty and ultimately affecting organizational performance.

2.2.3. Academic Contexts

Accent-based discrimination has become more visible in academic environments in recent years, whereas earlier it was discussed mainly in relation to the labor market. Empirical studies and institutional reports describe a growing number of cases in which students and faculty encounter mockery, biased evaluations, and various forms of microaggression related to accent, which points to the broader relevance of this issue within academic settings.

Recent research shows that, in academic contexts, accent may affect perceptions of competence and authority, as well as participation in discussions and the reception of oral contributions. Experimental and survey-based studies indicate that students and instructors with marked foreign accents are often perceived as less competent and less authoritative, even when their academic qualifications are comparable or higher [Fuertes et al., 2011; Dragojevic et al., 2018]. These evaluations, in turn, influence interaction within academic communities, including patterns of participation and feedback [Maindidze et al., 2025; Teló, 2024].

At the same time, public discourse increasingly addresses “accent snobbery” as a form of symbolic exclusion that is linked not so much to communicative efficiency as to underlying social hierarchies [Agudo, 2018]. This issue is also reflected in institutional initiatives. For example, at the University of Edinburgh, training programs and public discussions were introduced in 2023–2025 in response to complaints about accent-based mockery, lowered expectations, and exclusion in academic communication [Edinburgh Live, 2025]. Reactions to these measures were mixed: while accent

discrimination was acknowledged as a problem, the proposed solutions were sometimes seen as insufficient, which points to the persistence of accent-related hierarchies in academic culture.

In response to these challenges, many universities have introduced guidelines addressing accent bias, included this topic in diversity and inclusion programs, and implemented training for academic and administrative staff. Such measures are aimed at distinguishing between actual perceptual difficulties and socially conditioned evaluative biases. In this respect, academic institutions show developments similar to those observed in the legal domain, moving from isolated cases toward a more explicit recognition of accent as a socially relevant factor.

The developments mentioned above suggest a gradual shift within the university sector from implicit forms of accent-based exclusion toward more explicit institutional responses, in which linguistic diversity is increasingly treated as a resource rather than a deficit.

2.2.4. Legal Dimension

Within legal frameworks, recent years have witnessed a sustained trend toward the official recognition of discrimination based on accent and linguistic features – commonly referred to as *glottophobia* or *accent/linguistic discrimination* – as an independent ground for legal protection. This development reflects a broader shift in understanding accent not as an individual “speech defect” but as an element of social and cultural identity deserving protection alongside gender, race, or religion [Teló, 2024; Maindidze et al., 2025].

The French context is particularly illustrative in this regard. France became the first country to grant accent discrimination broad legal and public recognition. In 2020, amendments to the French Labour Code formally equated discrimination based on linguistic and accent-related features with other forms of discrimination [The Guardian, 2020]. These changes followed a series of court cases concerning refusals to hire candidates with marked regional or foreign accents, which contributed to increased institutional and public attention to accent-based discrimination. As a result, accent began to be increasingly conceptualized not as a marker of insufficient competence but as a component of social and linguistic identity deserving protection.

Comparable developments can be observed in Canada, where discussions of accent discrimination have received institutional recognition in recent years. In 2023, accent was included among the factors to be considered in human rights procedures and equality commissions. Concurrently, leading universities such as the University of Toronto and the University of British Columbia developed specialized courses and training programs on inclusive communication, with

particular emphasis on distinguishing genuine perceptual difficulties from discriminatory practices based on accent [Maindidze et al., 2025].

In this respect, accent increasingly comes to be viewed as a structural risk factor, prompting a gradual shift toward its recognition in corporate communication standards, training programs, and equal treatment policies aimed at mitigating covert forms of discrimination. At the corporate level, accent-related issues are increasingly integrated into DEI (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion) policies. Major Canadian banks, including RBC and TD Bank, have issued internal guidelines explicitly stating that accent must not be treated as an indicator of professional competence and that employees have the right to file complaints regarding manifestations of accent bias.

Further evidence of institutionalization is provided by initiatives of transnational corporations. Several international IT companies, including SAP and Microsoft, have introduced *plain accent guidance* – recommendations for HR specialists and line managers that emphasize focusing on speech content rather than pronunciation features and caution against using accent-related arguments in personnel decisions. These practices reflect attempts to translate scientific findings on accent bias mechanisms into applied regulatory frameworks [Teló, 2024].

To sum up, these observations suggest a shift from relatively limited scientific and public discussion toward a more explicit inclusion of accent-related issues in legal, academic, and corporate contexts. Comparative findings from different institutional domains show that foreign accent can function as a sociocultural marker involved in processes of social categorization and inequality. Available evidence indicates that accent bias occurs in professional, service, and academic settings and may persist even under conditions of high intelligibility. This suggests that accent is not evaluated solely as a communicative feature but is also interpreted as a socially meaningful signal. In both formal procedures and everyday interaction, such evaluations can contribute to forms of indirect exclusion that accumulate over time.

3 | Germany as a Sociolinguistic Context

In the German sociolinguistic context, Standard German (*Hochdeutsch*) traditionally holds a high normative status and is associated with educational legitimacy and institutional competence. Mastery of the standard variety is often linked to professional credibility and successful social integration. Accordingly, deviations from standard pronunciation – especially those associated with migration-related accents – tend to be interpreted not as neutral variation but as socially marked features. At the same time, it is important to distinguish between regional dialects and migration-related accents. Regional varieties such as Bavarian or Swabian are embedded in the national

linguistic repertoire and generally possess a certain degree of cultural legitimacy. By contrast, foreign-accented German is more often interpreted as an indicator of incomplete integration or limited linguistic authority. This difference reflects not only phonetic perception but also broader patterns of sociolinguistic stratification.

Thus, Germany represents a relevant context in which foreign accent and the presence of a so-called migration background (*Migrationshintergrund*) are connected with wider mechanisms of social inequality. Over the past two decades, immigration has played an important role in demographic and economic development in Germany. Studies by the Institute for Employment Research (IAB) show that migrant labour has contributed significantly to employment growth, and that recent positive labour market trends would have been difficult to sustain without it [Brücker et al., 2024; Brücker, 2025]. At the same time, this macroeconomic reliance on migration coexists with persistent differences in job quality, wages, and career opportunities, which affect migrants disproportionately. These inequalities are also related to language-based evaluations. While general linguistic competence is an important factor in labour market integration, foreign accent may act as a filtering mechanism in social and professional assessment that goes beyond objective qualifications. Empirical studies indicate that non-native accents can influence hiring decisions and occupational distribution, even when performance and communicative competence are comparable [DW, 2019; Dollmann, 2024]. Although employment rates among migrants tend to increase over time, convergence in income and occupational status remains incomplete. Regional analyses further show that migrants are more often concentrated in lower-paid sectors and areas with limited opportunities for upward mobility, which suggests an interaction between linguistic and social factors, including accent, and institutional labour market conditions [Schmid, 2023].

These dynamics are reinforced by the high normative status of Standard German, which functions not only as a communicative benchmark but also as a marker of educational legitimacy and symbolic capital. As Georgi demonstrates, educational stratification in Germany emerges at early stages of schooling and disproportionately affects children and adolescents with a migration background, who are more likely to encounter lowered expectations, tracking into non-academic pathways, and structural barriers to upward mobility [Georgi, 2024]. Language practices and pronunciation norms play a central role in these processes and are closely tied to differential educational outcomes.

Importantly, findings from the author's own empirical study conducted on German-language material corroborate these patterns. The results demonstrate systematic correlations between accent salience and social evaluations of status, perceived trustworthiness, and willingness to engage in

social interaction, even when overall proficiency is controlled statistically [Popova, 2021]. These effects emerge in simulated hiring scenarios, interpersonal judgment tasks, and discourse evaluations, pointing to a cross-domain influence of accent on both professional and social assessments.

At the level of public and institutional discourse, this constellation has been described as a paradox of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion. Migrants are publicly welcomed and institutionally courted as a solution to labour shortages, while at the same time experiencing discrimination and symbolic marginalization in everyday interactions and professional contexts [DW, 2019]. Debates surrounding school composition and proposed limits on the proportion of pupils with a migration background further illustrate how language use and accent become implicit indicators of educational quality and social cohesion [DW, 2025a]. Similar mechanisms have been documented in the housing market, where individuals perceived as linguistically or culturally “non-native” face discriminatory practices despite meeting formal criteria [DW, 2025b].

Taken together, these findings underscore that in the German context, foreign accent becomes one of the most visible and socially legitimate cues through which boundaries of inclusion and exclusion are drawn, particularly in contexts where explicit ethnic discrimination is normatively sanctioned. In this sense, Germany constitutes a particularly important empirical context for analyzing accent bias as a structural sociolinguistic phenomenon linking education, labour market integration, and everyday practices of social evaluation.

4 | Conclusion

The study brings together contemporary empirical and meta-analytic research on the role of foreign accent in social evaluation across different institutional contexts, including professional, service, academic, and legal domains. The results indicate that accent-related judgments are not limited to individual communicative situations but recur in settings where evaluation has broader social consequences.

The analysis suggests that foreign accent influences social evaluation not only through communicative factors such as intelligibility but also through sociocultural mechanisms. In this respect, accent is often interpreted not simply as a feature of speech but as a socially marked characteristic associated with processes of categorization and stereotyping.

The findings point to the cross-contextual nature of accent bias and its connection with broader patterns of social inequality. In different institutional domains, accent-related evaluations may affect access to social and professional opportunities, which allows interpreting accent bias as a relatively stable factor rather than an isolated perceptual effect.

Evidence from German-speaking contexts, including the author's empirical data, shows how these tendencies manifest in practice. In particular, a higher degree of accentedness is associated with lower evaluations of social status and trust, as well as reduced willingness to engage in interaction. These patterns remain observable even when overall linguistic competence is relatively high.

The results also point to several directions for further research. It appears important to examine more closely how specific phonetic features of accented speech become perceptually salient and which of them have the strongest impact on social evaluation. In this regard, particular attention may be paid to the role of the listener, including differences in linguistic background, multilingual experience, and professional experience, which can influence both perception and interpretation of accented speech. At the same time, a broader comparative perspective would make it possible to determine to what extent the patterns observed in German-speaking contexts are reproduced in other linguistic and cultural settings. Such an approach is especially relevant for migration societies characterized by a high degree of linguistic diversity. Another promising direction is the integration of experimental data with modeling approaches, which may help to relate phonetic characteristics of speech to perceptual responses and subsequent social evaluations within a single analytical framework.

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